

การเบี่ยงบังในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษเชิงธุรกิจ: คำแสดงทัศนภาวะ
โครงสร้างที่ขึ้นต้นด้วยอุบัติธรรม และประโยคเงื่อนไข

HEDGING IN BUSINESS ENGLISH COMMUNICATION: MODALITY, IMPERSONAL IT CONSTRUCTIONS, AND CONDITIONAL SENTENCES

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้ศึกษาการเบี่ยงบัง หรือการควบคุมระดับของความหมายหรือความตรงของข้อความที่สื่อสาร ในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษทางธุรกิจ โดยมุ่งที่เครื่องมือทางภาษาสามชนิด คือ คำแสดงทัศนภาวะ โครงสร้างที่ขึ้นต้นด้วยอุบัติธรรม และประโยคเงื่อนไข โดยมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์และชี้ให้เห็นว่า เครื่องมือทั้งสามนี้ สื่อความหมายในการสื่อสารทางธุรกิจอย่างไร ในฐานะรูปเบี่ยงบัง การอภิปรายใช้วิธีการวิเคราะห์เปรียบเทียบและการแสดงตัวอย่าง การศึกษาทำการวิเคราะห์ประโยคภาษาอังกฤษที่เป็นภาษาพูด และเขียนจากหัวแหล่งข้อมูล คือ ประโยคที่แต่งขึ้นโดยมีบริบททางธุรกิจเพื่อให้มีความหมายเหมาะสมสำหรับการวิเคราะห์เพื่อการศึกษาภาษา ตำรา หนังสือ งานวิจัย และสื่อการสอนออนไลน์ ซึ่งเป็นประโยคในสถานการณ์ทางธุรกิจ การศึกษานี้ยังอภิปรายเครื่องมือเพื่อการเบี่ยงบังทั้งสาม ในทางวากยสัมพันธ์และวจนปฎิศัตร์ (สัญชาตและปริพัทธ) ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ตัวอย่างภาษาอังกฤษที่ใช้ในการสื่อสารในบริบททางธุรกิจที่นำมาอภิปราย มาจากสถานการณ์ ประกอบด้วย การโต้ตอบทางจดหมาย อีเมลโต้ตอบเพื่อรับสมัครงาน ประกาศ การนำเสนอ การบอกแนวโน้มทางธุรกิจ และการดำเนินงานในสำนักงาน การเบี่ยงบังทั้งสามประเทมี ประส�ธิผลในสองลักษณะ ประการแรก การช่วยให้เกิดความสุภาพ โดยลดความตรงไปตรงมาในขณะที่ผู้พูดอยู่ในสภาพที่ต้องทำการเจรจา ยืนข้อเสนอ ทำข้อตกลง และแจ้งข้อกำหนดทางธุรกิจ ประการที่สอง เครื่องมือเหล่านี้ช่วยลดผลลัพธ์ที่ไม่พึงประสงค์ทางธุรกิจ คือ ความเข้าใจผิด ความเสี่ยง และการไม่เป็นไปตามข้อตกลง ในอนาคต โดยการลดทอนความหนักแน่นของการตั้งสมมติฐานและการจัดความไม่แน่นใจ ผลการศึกษาสนับสนุนการนำรูปเบี่ยงบังทั้งสามที่นำเสนอ มาปรับใช้กับการฝึกการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษทางธุรกิจ โดยจะสามารถทำให้ผู้ศึกษามีเครื่องมือเพื่อการสื่อสารที่มีประสิทธิภาพมากขึ้นในบริบทการทำงาน

คำสำคัญ: การสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษทางธุรกิจ, การเบี่ยงบัง, คำแสดงทัศนภาวะ, โครงสร้างที่ขึ้นต้นด้วยอุบัติธรรม, ประโยคเงื่อนไข

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of hedging or moderating the expressive tone of truth or directness in business English communication, focusing on three language tools: modality, impersonal constructions, and conditional sentences. The objective is to analyze and illustrate how these three devices hedge or control meanings conveyed in business communication. The

study employed a comparative analysis and illustrative examples as discussion methods. The analysis draws upon five language sources, including textbooks, books, research, and online teaching materials, to provide spoken and written English expressions from authentic business contexts. The study also examines hedging devices that rely on syntactic and pragmatic aspects, specifically epistemic and deontic meanings. The findings show that the examples of English used in authentic business contacts discussed are from situations including letter correspondence, job-recruitment emails, notices, presentations, business trends, and an office operation. The three hedging devices illustrate two types of hedging strategies. First, they create politeness by reducing the assertive tone of directness while the speakers or writers master business negotiations, proposals, agreements, and requirements. Second, the devices help mitigate undesirable business results, including misunderstanding, risk, and future unpromising business commitment, by softening too-solid assumptions and limiting uncertainty. The findings support that incorporating the three hedges proposed into business English communication skill enhancement can equip learners with the devices for more effective interactions in professional settings.

Keywords: Business English Communication, Hedging, Modality, Impersonal it Constructions, Conditional sentences

Introduction

HEDGING is a common linguistic phenomenon that can be seen in both written and spoken communication. It is a communicative strategy that makes a sentence seem less overly directly by reducing its illocutionary impact.

The concept of hedging was introduced by Lakoff (1973), who described hedges as expressions that are employed to adjust the truth or category of concepts, making their meaning more flexible. Since then, hedging has been studied in a wide range of fields, including scientific, political, courtroom, and medical communication. One of the most recognized works is the analysis of hedging in the context of politeness by Brown & Levinson (1987), who showed how hedges can both weaken and strengthen communication and how they might reduce criticism. Another notable work is by Prince, Frader, and Bosk (1982), who explored hedging in medical communication.

This study examines three principal hedging tools—modality, impersonal it constructions, and conditional clauses—that are particularly challenging for students in the business English courses offered by the English Program at Udon Thani Rajabhat University. Despite their apparent simplicity, these structures demonstrate syntactic and pragmatic complexity and require comprehensive teaching. Instructing them requires the teachers to understand the several layers of meaning and function to ensure that students master both their application and underlying structure. A mastery of these devices will help improve their communicative skills

enable them to apply hedging successfully in professional contexts, thereby contributing to their success in future careers.

Modality and Hedging in Business English Communication

In this section, modality is introduced as a linguistic phenomenon contributing to business English communication, in parallel with its companies--the impersonal it constructions and conditional sentences, which will be explored respectively. In English, the modal verbs are a primary grammatical word set that realizes or expresses modality. In communication, they are mainly used to indicate participants' attitudes toward what they are saying or when they are concerned about the effect of what are being said on the listeners (The University of Birmingham and Collins Cobuild, 1990; pp. 217-243). Sinturat (2010) researched the top 30 English lexical phrases or groups of words that frequently occurred in business letters retrieved from online Business Letter Corpus (BLC) and five textbooks used to teach writing for business purposes in Thai universities. The study results reveal that in the top 30, the lexical phrases with modal verbs ranked in the top 15 and were marked as recurrent groups of words, repeated in occurrence. The modal verbs frequently occur at top rank in business correspondence (Sinturat, 2010) and across registers (Biber et al., 2002, pp. 174-185)

In this study, modality and its merits to enhance business English correspondence are discussed by exploring the definition, the modal verbs as modality's syntactic realization, and its contribution to hedging in business English communication. Example expressions from business contexts are employed to illustrate the effectiveness of modality and hedging modal verbs in business English.

Modality

Modality is a concept in linguistics; it is about the speakers' attitudes or opinions (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024). For a quick understanding, modality can be defined in a grammatical sense as a language mastering that exploits grammatical tools to navigate communication based on the speakers' or writers' views of what they are saying or writing on the listeners or readers, and when speakers or writers care about what they say or write that it may result in certain ways to their audiences, they possibly want to control the ways they speak or write. In terms of pragmatics, modality is classified into 1) epistemic modality, which is about the speakers' assessment of the validity of what they are saying whether it is certainty, necessity, probability, and possibility and 2) deontic, which concerns obligation, desirability, inclination, and permission (Coffin, et al., 2009, pp. 171).

English Modal Verbs: The Syntactic Realization of Modality

In English, the verbs called “modal verbs,” “modals”, “modal auxiliaries”, or “modal auxiliary verbs” are grammatical words and primary tools of modality. In the verb phrase of a clause or a sentence, a modal verb adds up meaning to the main verb enable the speaker or writer to express certainty, possibility, willingness, obligation, necessity, and ability using modal words and expressions (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024).

Modal verbs might be familiar to English users regarding their syntactic realization or word forms in three subtypes— **1) modal verbs commonly used in English:** can, could, will, would, may, might, shall, should, must, and ought to, **2) semi-modal verbs:** dare, need, used to, and **3) other forms of verb that function like the modal verbs:** had better, have to, have got to, be supposed to, be going to (The University of Birmingham and Collins Cobuild, 1990, pp. 217-243; Biber et al., 2002, pp. 174-185). They are auxiliaries or grammatical words that commonly function to form grammatical English sentences in contrast to lexical words, words that have meaning, such as “business,” “grow,” or “dramatically”. Interestingly, unlike other auxiliaries, they can be used as hedges to express modality; it means they have meanings. Mur-Duenas (2016) refers to these modal verbs as “hedging modal verbs.” In this study, the common modal verbs are hedging words or hedges in the discussion to illustrate modality in effective business English communication.

Modality and Hedging

Hedging is “a way of avoiding giving a direct answer or opinion” and especially in financial and economic areas as “a way of controlling or limiting a loss or risk” (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024). In workplace language, positive or negative judgment toward jobs or people plays a crucial role; the way it is expressed e.g. with directness or indirectness inevitably affects the relationship of people involved in the judgment (Maybin, et al., 2007; pp. 173). Thus, participants in workplace communication need to use language as a means of productive and smooth correspondence.

Using “You come at 9 a.m.” and “You can come at 9 a.m.” to make an appointment, for participants of various language backgrounds, may raise questions— “What meaning can the sentences communicate?” and “Do they reach the same goal of the interaction as they quite look alike?” While both can be used to schedule, “You can come at 9 a.m.” implies permission and flexibility, making it a softer request. In contrast, “You come at 9 a.m.” may seem impolite to native speakers. The simple present tense suggests a habitual action rather than a specific appointment while the optional: “Come at 9 a.m.” sounds commanding.

Modality and English Modal Verbs: Hedging in Business Communication

This study posits that modality and its syntactic realizations, English modal verbs, contribute to hedging in global business communication contexts to mitigate risk, express flexibility, avoid directness, etc. Speakers control their English language use in a business register usually to maintain professionalism while achieving communication goals.

- 1) **Talking about the future** (Epistemic modality: certainty)
 - 1a “At the moment, the economy is fine, but next year unemployment might go up.”
 - 1b “The economy may go up or down in the next year.”

“may” and “might” express “uncertainty” or when one is not sure about something (Duckworth, 2006). In this case, language of uncertainty protects the speaker from the risk of making a pretty confident prediction or assumption.
- 2) **In a job recruitment via e-mails when a company want to get to know the job candidate** (Deontic modality: desirability):
 - 2a “What are your three best current European ideas?” (original-version email)
 - 2b “Could you tell me what you consider to be the three most important issues in European trading at the moment?” (revised-version email) “could” is used to create indirectness by moderating the directness of the wh-question in 2a: “What are your...?” (Coffin, et al., 2009; pp. 352-353)
- 3) **In a presentation** (Deontic modality: desirability):
 - 3a “Attention please.”

“May I have your attention?”
 - 3b “Please ask questions at the end.”

“Could you please save your questions until the end?”

Instead of the directness of the two expressions in 3a, “may” and “could” soften the directness of their avatars in 3b: “May I have your attention?” and “Could you please save your questions until the end?” Despite requiring the audience to pay attention or follow some rules, the speaker sounds polite to the presentation’s participants.

4) **Written English in a notice** (Deontic modality: obligation)

4

DECLARATION

You, or someone on your behalf, must sign below.

Declare that the information given above is true and complete
(Duckworth, 2006)

Example 4 is tricky as the hedge “must” helps reinforce the obligation not to lessen its stiffness. While the meaning conveyed sounds forceful and obligatory, “must” helps limit uncertainty in that the person involved is seriously required to sign, or either party will take a risk in an incomplete business agreement or later unpromising commitment.

In conclusion, the modality concept, by exploring English expressions in business contexts that make use of the modal verbs, can hedge or control the language used for effective business interactions and result in 1) politeness by lessening directness to achieve cooperation when doing a presentation and desirable response from the job candidate and 2) risk management by avoiding making too solid assumptions and future unpromising business commitment.

English hedging modal verbs, as well as modal verbs, are also used in other syntactic and pragmatic aspects. They are variant in positions and co-occur with other constructions., and the influence of the English tenses. Modality itself is universal. In English, modality also takes other structures as hedges and in different registers, not only in the business context. Thus, modality and English modal verbs are so vast that they gain attention from those who want to master their English communication skills.

Impersonal It Constructions and Hedging in Business English Communication

In addition to modal verbs, which are commonly used to convey epistemic and deontic meanings crucial for business communication (Payne, 2011), one effective tool that enables business professionals to communicate effectively with diplomacy is the impersonal it constructions. The efficiency of it constructions in hedging comes from their ability to shift the focus from the speaker’s accountability to the action or decision instead, emphasizing the epistemic or deontic meaning of the proposition and creating a more impersonal and formal tone.

The use of impersonal it constructions as hedging devices in business English will be explored in this part, with a focus on two key types: impersonal it in raising and Impersonal it in extraposed noun clause. The sentences used in this part are composed based on authentic business contexts to provide a pedagogically sound foundation for their analysis.

Impersonal It Construction in Raising

Raising predicates such as “seem,” “appear,” and “be likely” are crucial for hedging in business English as the epistemic meaning of the sentence is introduced at the beginning of the sentence. These predicates do not require subjects at all since they have no semantic connection with the subject (Poole, 2011). However, as the subject position cannot be left blank, the expletive pronoun “it,” which is a semantically empty element but can function syntactically (Radford, 2010), is placed at the subject position to satisfy the syntactic requirement of the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) proposed by Chomsky (1981). The EPP requires that every verb needs a subject. Therefore, the impersonal pronoun “it” is placed in the subject position to function as an expletive subject of the raising predicate.

Raising predicates require proposition complements which can be in the form of finite or non-finite clauses. The non-raising construction with the impersonal or expletive “it” to fill the subject place allows the semantic subject to stay in its original location and is therefore closest to the deep structure as in “It seems that the proposal is effective.”

However, this kind of predicate allows the semantic subject that originates in the complement clause introduced by “that” to “raise” to become the subject of the matrix clause, resulting in raising construction as in “The proposal seems to be effective.”

In non-raising construction, the subject of the embedded clause remains in its original position. Conversely, in raising construction, the subject of the embedded clause is “raised” to the subject position of the main clause. This transformation causes the verb of the embedded clause to convert into an infinitive. The removal of the subject from the embedded clause leaves the verb without an explicit subject. Consequently, this requires the use of an infinitive that can refer back to the subject of the main sentence.

Impersonal It Construction in Extraposed Noun Clauses

Extraposition is a syntactic construction that involves relocating or postponing a clause, typically subordinate noun clauses functioning as a subject or object, to the end of the sentence, with the impersonal pronoun “it” serving as a placeholder at the subject position (Quirk et al., 1985). The placement of “it” at the subject position and the shift of heavier elements to the end enhances sentence readability and natural flow.

Constructions with extraposition it in this context can be categorized into two types: those with modal adjectives and those with passivized deontic verbs. The first group can be further classified into adjectives with epistemic meaning, which do not trigger the subjunctive mood, and those with deontic meaning, which usually trigger the subjunctive mood. However, when impersonal it is paired with passivized deontic verbs, the subjunctive mood is often required.

Impersonal It Construction with Modal Adjectives

Certain adjectives, such as obligatory, advisable, certain, predictable, and desirable, could potentially be classified as modal adjectives because they share modals' epistemic and deontic meanings (Coffin et al., 2009). Typically, the extraposition structure places them at the front of the sentence, acting as both the introductory part and a hedging device. However, these adjectives induce verbs in different moods. The key point is that modal adjectives with deontic meaning require the subjunctive verb in the subordinate sentence while adjectives with epistemic meaning do not.

Epistemic Adjectives

Expressions with adjectives with epistemic meaning like "It is possible that," and "It is probable that" do not induce the subjunctive mood in the subordinate clause because they communicate possibility or probability rather than necessity or obligation. In these cases, the verb in the subordinate clause is conjugated according to standard rules, taking the regular indicative form; for example, "It is possible that the team will meet the deadline."

Using such construction enables speakers to soften their assertions by incorporating an element of uncertainty rather than making definitive claims. This tool is particularly beneficial in business settings where adaptability and prudence are essential.

Deontic Adjectives

Adjectives carrying deontic meaning, such as "necessary," "important," "essential," and "crucial," trigger the subjunctive mood in English. In this case, the verb in the subordinate noun clause assumes its base form to indicate a specific mood that conveys a demand and recommendation known as the subjunctive construction.

For instance, in "It is necessary that John attend the meeting," the verb "attend" is in the subjunctive mood because the sentence expresses a necessity. It would be inappropriate to use "attends" in the formal context since official suggestions require the subjunctive mood. These constructions gently communicate the necessary actions without appearing excessively assertive. For example, "It is essential that the team submit the annual report," signals an obligation; nevertheless, it is less forceful than "The team must submit the annual report."

Impersonal It Construction with Passivized Deontic Verbs

The construction "It is recommended that" exemplifies a passive voice structure incorporating verbs with deontic meanings, such as "recommend," "advise," and "suggest" (Coffin et al, 2009). Unlike modal adjective constructions (e.g., "It is necessary that"), this form uses verbs with deontic meaning in the passive form to act as a hedging device and extrapose it at the beginning of the sentence; for example, "It is recommended that the report be revised."

This use of passive voice clause with extraposition it as hedging establishes an impersonal tone, distancing the speakers from their statements which would be more direct with the use of first-person pronouns and active voice (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). This construction also softens the commitment to the statement while still conveying formality and politeness. In other words, it is more pleasing than a straightforward imperative. “Revise the report.” This extraposition construction induces the subjunctive mood as the verbs express obligation or advisability.

Despite their apparent simplicity, impersonal it constructions are grammatically intricate, and they involve different underlying grammatical features. It is necessary that business English learners master these constructions to avoid overgeneralization and mistakes as well as to appear more professional in business communication.

Conditional Sentences and Hedging in Business English Communication

Apart from employing modality and constructions starting with "it," another effective linguistic tool for softening statements and enhancing politeness in business communication is the use of conditional sentences. As noted by Yue and Wang (2014), hedging plays a key role in written correspondence by making statements less assertive. Conditional sentences serve a similar purpose, softening the tone and helping to defuse potential disputes, particularly when the other party raises additional requests or objections. This strategy is especially important in business interactions, where politeness is vital for maintaining positive relationships between organizations. Brown and Levinson's politeness model reinforces this idea, showing that the principles of politeness are applicable across different languages and can be identified in both native and non-native texts and speech (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

In this section, we examine the use of conditional sentences as hedges in business correspondence, drawn from various types of business letters. The discussion will illustrate how conditional sentences can serve multiple functions: softening agreements for mutual benefit, making polite inquiries, addressing potential issues and offering assistance, formulating polite requests, and setting conditions for action.

1) Softening Agreement for Mutual Benefits

5a, as quoted in the previous study by Jin (2020), demonstrates how a conditional sentence can soften an agreement in a business letter. In contrast, 5b illustrates the same idea without using a conditional clause.

5a “If the quality of your goods could meet our customers’ satisfaction, we shall send further orders in the near future.”

5b “More orders will be sent to you when our customers are pleased with the good’s quality.”

Sentences 5a and 5b provide the recipient with different tones of offering. The conditional clause in sentence A has a more polite and softer tone for negotiating the agreement to reach mutual benefits without affecting relationship among the parties.

2) Polite Inquiry

The example in 6a, cited in Jin's (2020) earlier study, shows how a conditional sentence can serve as a polite inquiry in a business letter. Conversely, the subsequent sentence in 6b conveys the same concept without employing a conditional clause.

6a “We will also be interested to know what benefits we are likely to get if the contract has been approved.”

6b “What can be the benefits we will get from the approved contract?” Upon examining the two sentences, it is evident that both serve as inquiries regarding the benefits to be received. However, sentence 6a demonstrates a greater degree of appropriateness and friendliness in its inquiry compared to sentence 6b. It can be inferred that the use of conditionals contributes to this enhanced politeness.

3) Addressing Potential Issues and Offering Assistance

7 “If there are any issues with the delivery, please inform us immediately.”

(Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2010)

The conditional clause indicates the potential nature of the problem while also encouraging open communication and showcasing a proactive attitude. In the business world, when partners engage in agreements, it is essential to ensure that the deal is finalized without any issues. However, since unexpected situations can arise at any time, an effective business partner should allow for flexibility in addressing problems and convey their readiness to provide support in closing the deal. Similarly, the use of conditional sentence in pre-close letter for offering assistance can be illustrated as follow:

8 “If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to let us know.”

From the aforementioned sentence, the use of negative strategies identified the need for the sender to minimize offering assistance and maintain a good relationship with the receiver. In addition, the pre-close realization, “If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to let us know...” was used to ensure the cooperation of the receiver.

4) Polite Request

9a “If you accept this offer, I would appreciate your signing and returning at your earliest convenience a copy of this letter along with the enclosed Letter of Assignment for documentation purposes.” (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2010).

9b “Please sign and return at your earliest convenience a copy of this letter along with the enclosed Letter of Assignment for documentation purposes after you accept this offer.”

To make a polite request in a job offer letter, the conditional clause serves as a sentence starter, leading into a request. In business correspondence, writers often avoid directly stating the required action from the other party. Instead, they frequently use conditionals to initiate the request, which helps soften the tone while indicating the expected action contingent upon acceptance. Conversely, 9b conveys a sense of politeness as well, but its tone suggests a command due to the direct initiation of the required actions. That is to say, when conditional is used for offering suggestions or asking for more efforts from the counterpart, it can reduce the failure of the transaction behind the proposed suggestions and make the additional hopes more available which can be more probably acknowledged by the other party (Zi & Yuyang, 2014).

5) Setting Conditions for Action

Conditionals can clarify the conditions under which certain actions will be taken.

10a “If the terms are agreeable, we will proceed with the contract.”

10b “We will proceed with the contract after the terms have been approved.”

Business correspondence frequently seeks to compel another party to do specific activities. The hedging conditional clause is used in the language above to establish a requirement prior to the action being suggested. This enables the receiver to clearly understand the terms and conditions as well as what will happen if the recipient agrees or disagrees with them. By explicitly connecting activities to certain contexts, this aids in managing expectations. In contrast to sentence 10b, the tone is less courteous and kind because it conveys the information in a predetermined manner.

In a manner like the following sentence, one may employ a conditional clause at the outset to establish a condition for the actions to be undertaken by the proposed party. The allowance for negotiation under a soft and polite tone remains as shown below:

11 “If the Overwatch Villa were to reserve a block of rooms for our crew members, we'd be happy to promote the Overwatch Villa in our in-flight magazine at a significant discount.” (<https://www.coursehero.com/file/47721678/BUSINESS-LETTERdocx>)

In summary, using conditionals as hedges can enhance business communication, allowing for clearer expression of ideas and possibilities. This approach improves politeness, formality, and authority in important transactions, which are crucial in the commercial world where tone can influence outcomes. Mastering conditionals can significantly impact workplace communication, strengthening relationships among stakeholders and leading to more successful negotiations and collaborations.

Conclusion

As an international language, English is also used for business and trade. In this case, it has been a language for ‘getting things done’ and nowadays no longer limited to English native speakers, as people with different first-language backgrounds from around the world engage in business using English (Maybin, et al., 2007; pp. 173). In international business interactions, both spoken and written, participants require to master their English language use to ensure successful communication and smooth conversations. Hedging in business English interactions employing modality, impersonal it constructions, and conditional sentences are practical language tools, in this respect, to facilitate avoiding undesirable effects in Business English communication e.g. impoliteness, misunderstanding, risk, or even business failure.

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