



## THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION AND BUSINESS LANGUAGE LEARNING

### ZNAČAJ INTERKULTURALNE POSLOVNE KOMUNIKACIJE I UČENJA POSLOVNOG JEZIKA

Katarina Milosavljević, Vesna Čelik Babić, Katarina Držajić

Singidunum University, Faculty of Business, 32 Danijelova St., 11000 Belgrade, Serbia

#### Abstract:

Intercultural business communication has become a significant issue due to an increased international cooperation between institutions. In order to do business successfully with a foreign company, one is nowadays expected to be acquainted with at least the basics of intercultural competence, which has even become an important subject taught to university students. We decided to analyze some specific characteristics of intercultural business communication using the data obtained concerning German and Italian business etiquette – we collected the information about the Germans through a survey conducted among the employees of a German company in Belgrade, while the data about the Italian was collected through interviews. In this research paper, we shall also deal with some specific features of business language compared to the general one using the examples of English and German, and try to reveal why it is important for students not only to develop both general and business language proficiency.

#### Key words:

business communication, intercultural competence, German, Italian, English.

#### Apstrakt:

Interkulturalna poslovna komunikacija veoma je značajna u današnje vreme s obzirom na sve veću međunarodnu saradnju među institucijama. Kako bismo uspešno poslovali sa strancima, od nas se očekuje da budemo upoznati bar sa osnovama interkulturalnih kompetencija koje su postale značajan predmet izučavanja na pojedinim univerzitetima. U ovom radu analiziraćemo pojedine karakteristike interkulturalne komunikacije uz pomoć podataka vezanih za nemačku i italijansku poslovnu kulturu – podatke o Nemicima dobili smo pomoću ankete, dok smo do saznanja o Italijanima došli pomoću intervjua. U ovom radu se takođe bavimo specifičnim karakteristikama poslovnog jezika u odnosu na opšti koristeći primere iz nemačkog i engleskog, dok pokušavam i da otkrijemo zašto je za studente važno ne samo da steknu znanje opšteg jezika, već i poslovnog.

#### Ključne reči:

poslovna komunikacija, interkulturalna kompetencija, nemački, italijanski, engleski.

## INTRODUCTION

Since so much importance has recently been given to intercultural business communication, we decided to conduct research about some crucial cultural differences in this kind of communication, providing the examples of two European countries. In the modern world, there is an increased international cooperation between institutions, so one has to be acquainted with different kinds of business etiquette in different cultures. Given the fact that Germans and Italians differ quite a lot not only in their business etiquette, but also in their daily behaviour, we found it interesting to compare these two cultures in our research.

Another thing we have been interested in is the importance of teaching business languages at universities. We shall explain why it is crucial to acquire at least some basic proficiency in business language, providing the example of Singidunum University and listing certain examples of business expressions in German and English. This research will hopefully clarify the importance of business language learning and provide the readers with some interesting information about different kinds of business communication.

## GERMAN AND ITALIAN BUSINESS ETIQUETTE

This section deals with the differences in business communication and business manners of the people in Germany and Italy. We have chosen these two countries as an illustration because they have a lot of similarities, but also differences when it comes to business. When learning a foreign language, in this case business language, it is equally important to learn something about the culture of the people. Successful business communication largely depends on the knowledge regarded to a nation's manners. Therefore, we analyzed the characteristics that are crucial in doing business. When it comes to the Germans, these features are politeness, thoroughness, fairness, accuracy, instructive criticism *etc.* (Buscha & Linthout, 2007, p. 32) As regards the Italians, these are openness, cheerful entrepreneurial spirit, willingness to change and risk, professionalism *etc.* The conclusions we have come to may be of use to business people and tourists, or people who are interested in communication diversity among nations.

At a business meeting, the message carries both verbal communication, and a set of signals and signs of nonverbal communication. Here, the emphasis will be placed on non-verbal



communication, but it is very important to view the interlocutor and their words in accordance with the overall picture. According to Rot, there are several types of kynesthetic signs (signs that indicate the movement of a body part) and each is equally important when reading messages: facial movements, the direction of gaze, movements of the arms, legs, head and other parts of the body, posture (Rot, 2010, p. 131).

Unlike the Italians, one will quickly learn that they are very intimate. If you have just met some Italians and drank coffee with them at a party, a kiss on both cheeks will follow. Touching the Italians does not necessarily imply *hitting on* them, as they are much more tactile with people (Falassi & Flower, 2000, p. 206). They can just talk to you and place their hand on your shoulder. They are very close to each other when communicating. The Serbs are characterized by a greater casualness in business and jokes are part of a side business, while the Germans are completely different. They find touching inappropriate in communication and do not stand so close to each other. Also, they do not interrupt each other and rarely resort to jokes and humor in business.

According to Miljojko Bazic, there are topics that are preferable during a business lunch or a trip with the Germans and Italians, as well as the topics that should be avoided. With the Germans, it is desirable to talk about sport (mostly football), business experience with Germans, business, current issues, journeys, weather *etc.* You should avoid talking about the World war II and Hitler, comparing Germany with Austria, personal issues *etc.* (Bazić, 2009, p. 252) When it comes to the Italians, the undesirable topics are mafia, religion, taxes, politics and Vatican manipulation *etc.* The desirable ones are food and drink (spaghetti, espresso, wine), fashion, architecture, art, Italian customs *etc.* (Bazić, 2009, p. 253)

## RESEARCH AND RESULTS

For the purpose of this paper, a survey was conducted among fifteen people employed in the German firm GIZ in Belgrade (German Society for International Cooperation)<sup>1</sup>. It is aimed at finding out what is most important to them in communication in the workplace. Since we did not find a sufficient number of respondents from Italy, a survey was not carried out, but only an interview with two respondents. A survey manual was of great help in planning and designing the survey questions. The questions are clear, precise, with clearly defined objectives. Most of the answers are given in a form of a five-point Likert scale in order to be able to express the degree of frequency or representation of some properties. The survey was anonymous for a period of ten minutes. From the data collected, the response was calculated by the percentage distribution of responses a), b), c), d) or e) (Weskelberg, 2004).

The survey was conducted on a small number of respondents. In order to be as objective as possible, we also conducted an interview and discussion with respondents. It should also be noted that most of the respondents have lived and worked for years in Belgrade, Serbia, and they have certainly adopted some habits from the Serbian population.

The results show that 10% of respondents consider directness very important, 30% a bit and 60% consider it fine. The prevailing answer is that it is quite wrong to be direct and clearly express what bothers you or what you do not like. The Germans are mainly such in business. They do not hide much. Rather, they will make an embarrassing situation for the purpose of correcting some mistakes than remain silent. In addition, they are insulted by tricks and disrespect for the rules. As we explained

to our respondents, Italians are more relaxed and less direct, more tolerant to violations of rules when doing business.

Openness is a prerequisite of every good communication and cooperation. About 50% considered it very important, 10% important, 40% a fine trait. In fact, the prevalent view is that openness is important. Without it, it is not easy to do business. The Italians are known for their openness in personal and business life. They open up extremely fast, mostly have no problem to discuss private matters, quickly transform from business partners to friends. The Germans are completely different - they appreciate openness, but at the same time, they think of openness in business, and not the openness of any kind. They are prone to fast and efficient problem solving and openly communicate everyone's successes and mistakes.

How much they smile or a little fun at work matter for Germans is investigated in this matter. There is a stereotype that Germans are boring, unfunny and too serious. The truth is that their humour often tends towards sarcasm and irony, but they do like to joke. They are less noisy than the Serbs or Italians, and are less prone to exaggeration. From the total of 100%, 30% corresponds to the humor at work as very important, 10% that it is important, 20% said it was fine, 20% think it is irrelevant and 20% that it is completely irrelevant.

Accuracy is certainly highly valued and respected. Italians have explained to us that 20 minutes does not change anything, as there are frequent traffic jams and they see no problem with that. On the other hand, Germans really respect the time. Most of the respondents said that the accuracy is very important - 50% of them, 20% said it was important, 20% had a neutral response - not important nor unimportant and 10% (as in this case, one respondent) regarded the accuracy as fully irrelevant. According to this survey and interview with them, we conclude that Germans consider accuracy very important and appreciate it.

Seriousness is for 30% very important, 30% important, 30% fine and for 10% of the respondents irrelevant. Here it was alluded to the seriousness of such responsible work that the Germans, but for most of the people this has been highly valued. When you have to work, you work. This comment is often heard at work as confirmed by almost all the respondents.

The idea of studying the instructive criticism was given to us by a Serbian woman who has worked with the Germans for years. She says that she noticed that at each presentation, meeting or work, her fellow Germans give some criticism. This criticism is not malicious, it is useful as well-intentioned advice, and if you do not criticise, it can be interpreted as a lack of interest. The replies look like this: 30% say that the criticism is very important, 30% felt it was important and 40% felt it was just fine. The Germans do not lack either in praise, although they communicate it more rarely than criticism. The Italians say that they also have an educational praise which is far more common than instructive criticism.

The term *elegance* refers to how important it is for someone to be elegant ie. well-dressed. This is what the results look like: elegance is very important for 40%, important for 10%, it's okay to be elegant for 40%, and not important for 10%. However, the view that it is important dominates. According to Margaret Payer and many other researchers, even body type shows features of a speaker and fits into his mindset or at least sends a signal to the caller. (Payer, 2000)

Teamwork is for 40% very important, 30% important, 10% fine, 10% not so important and 10% totally irrelevant. According to this survey and the interview with respondents, we came to the conclusion that teamwork is a great way to work and contributes to the progress of the whole company, because employees are largely related to the job.

1 Survey outline and results are provided in appendices



The last question was open-ended and examines what is more important to a person at work and this is the most common response from our respondents from Germany. What is important is fairness. One person said that they appreciate discretion, and discretion is actually inconspicuous. She believes that everyone should do their job thoroughly and unnoticeably, and the results will show what this person has done, it does not have to prove him and attracts attention. They noted that the Serbian way of doing business is too conspicuous and intrusive. Professionalism is also listed here. It is undisputed that professionalism occupies an important place in this list of properties in the German way of doing business. When someone is competent, they will be more respected by colleagues, because true knowledge is obvious and cannot be challenged. Hard work and effort is appreciated. The segment that is probably the most important is politeness, as it is an indication that the interviewee is benevolent, gentle, unobtrusive and willing to cooperate. It would be poorly interpreted if you stopped addressing a person formally at a meeting and used commands, jokes and acted casually.

## THE SPECIFICS OF TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Students are very interested and motivated to learn foreign languages. They are well-aware of the importance of foreign languages, the specific needs of certain linguistic knowledge and skills for subsequent progress into professional life. Vučo *et al.* (2009, p. 245) explained that bilingual teaching was extremely important for cultural education and the acquisition of knowledge related to equality, both in a mother tongue and a foreign language. Having this in mind, the main aim of teaching foreign languages and the requirements placed on a teacher is training students for international communication. A foreign language teacher's task is very complex and is reflected in the ways of adapting teaching content or teaching methods to these requirements.

However, the aims of 'general language' that is widely taught at colleges and technical language in the function of a certain profession, i.e. LSP, are different. LSP should provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary for successful oral and written communication in typical situations associated with a particular profession. This implies that a language teacher, in accordance with the curriculum, teaches a 'general language', but should continue to focus on the specifics of a language for specific purposes, i.e. to choose good literature, i.e. proper teaching material and be acquainted with the given area of professional foreign language.

Another, no less important aggravating factor, is the varying degree of previous knowledge of students, or their competence at the level of 'basic language skills', which greatly slows down the learning process when it comes to professional language. If students have the knowledge of a foreign language, the teacher can introduce into the teaching process some specifics related to specific purposes, i.e. to adapt the teaching to systematic study of vocabulary and processing of technical texts. If there is no such background, the teaching process is based on a 'general foreign language'.

Breu (Vučo *et al.*, 2009, p. 509) introduced several principles on which teaching a language in a non-philological faculty should be based:

1. Development and encouragement of independent learning
2. Focus on communication and practice

3. Sensibility in terms of intercultural aspects
4. Focus on a student and an altered role of a teacher
5. Focus on profession
6. Variety of means and methods

So far, the educational process has been a result of a unique system of general learning when it comes to German language. Therefore, Singidunum University students were trained to acquire knowledge in the field of 'general language skills'. Hence, when designing the curriculum of a foreign language - with an emphasis on the specifics of professional language - there is a need for careful selection of literature, or the design of the content of textbooks, which is fully aligned with the needs and interests of students of a particular profession.

The teaching materials should include basic terminology used in business communication ('Business English' or 'Geschäftsdeutsch'), so that the students master the complex terminology. Through the illustration of several terms of professional business English and German language, vocabulary is presented, which is aligned with the needs and interests of students of a particular profession and which students should adopt for their future professional life.

### Terms and phrases (Laudius, 2015)

#### Reminders and complaints concerning delays in delivery

The goods we ordered on ... are ... days/weeks overdue/behind schedule.

Die am ... bestellten Waren sind ...Tage/Wochen überfällig.

Despite your assurance that the work would be completed/performed/carried out by ... we have to inform you that this is not the case.

Trotz Ihrer Zusicherung, dass die Arbeiten bis ... fertig gestellt/ausgeführt sein werden, müssen wir Ihnen mitteilen, dass dies nicht der Fall ist.

#### Seller's reply and explanations for delay

We are sorry for the delay and will do our utmost to have the goods ready for shipment by...

Die Verzögerung tut uns Leid und wir werden unser Möglichstes tun, die Waren bis zum ... zum Versand bereitzustellen.

Your delay in delivery places us in a difficult/embarrassing position.

Ihr Lieferverzug bringt uns in eine schwierige/unangenehme Lage.

#### Seller's apology and reassurance

The delay is due to/has been caused by the exceptionally strong demand during the past few months.

Die Verzögerung ist auf die außergewöhnlich lebhafte Nachfrage während der letzten Monate zurückzuführen

Should you fail to deliver the goods by ..., we will be forced/compelled to cancel the order.

Falls Sie die Waren nicht bis zum ... liefern, sehen wir uns gezwungen, die Bestellung zu stornieren.

We apologise sincerely for the delay which was unfortunately due to circumstances beyond our control.

Wir entschuldigen uns aufrichtig für die Verspätung, die leider auf Umstände zurückzuführen ist, die außerhalb unserer Kontrolle liegen.

## CONCLUSION

Our research presents some of the main features of German and Italian business communication that should be taken into account when doing business with people from these countries. It is no wonder that intercultural competence has become such an important issue in today's business world, so, in order to prepare for their future career, many university students are taught this subject as a significant one for their professional development.

Hopefully, we have provided some favourable suggestions that might be of use for the improvement of business language



teaching. It is well-known that certain proficiency in a foreign language, especially English and German, is expected from young university graduates in their job pursuit. This is why the students are often highly motivated to learn languages, having in mind how helpful they might be in their *job-hunting*, as well as further progress in their career.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Survey outline and interview questions

#### Underline one of the five answers:

In doing business (in meetings, business trips *etc.*) I find:

Directness (clear criticism or praise without equivocation)

- ◆ very important
- ◆ important
- ◆ neither important nor unimportant
- ◆ unimportant
- ◆ totally unimportant

Openness (to new things, criticism, suggestions)

- ◆ very important
- ◆ important
- ◆ neither important nor unimportant
- ◆ unimportant
- ◆ totally unimportant

Smile (jokes in workplace)

- ◆ very important
- ◆ important
- ◆ neither important nor unimportant
- ◆ unimportant
- ◆ totally unimportant

Punctuality (respecting deadlines, arriving on time, quick reply to e-mails)

- ◆ very important
- ◆ important
- ◆ neither important nor unimportant
- ◆ unimportant
- ◆ totally unimportant

Seriousness in business (distinction between professional nad private life)

- ◆ very important
- ◆ important
- ◆ neither important nor unimportant
- ◆ unimportant
- ◆ totally unimportant

Educational criticism

- ◆ very important
- ◆ important
- ◆ neither important nor unimportant
- ◆ unimportant
- ◆ totally unimportant

Elegance of dress (Clothes make/don't make a man)

- ◆ very important
- ◆ important
- ◆ neither important nor unimportant
- ◆ unimportant
- ◆ totally unimportant

Teamwork

- ◆ very important
- ◆ important
- ◆ neither important nor unimportant
- ◆ unimportant
- ◆ totally unimportant

What else is important in business communication?

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## APPENDIX 2

### Survey results

Directness (clear criticism or praise without equivocation) - Table 1

Very important	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Unimportant	Totally unimportant
10%	30%	60%	0%	0%

Openness (to new things, criticism, suggestions) - Table 2

Very important	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Unimportant	Totally unimportant
50%	10%	40%	0%	0%

Smile (jokes in workplace) - Table 3

Very important	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Unimportant	Totally unimportant
30%	10%	20%	20%	20%

Punctuality (respecting deadlines, arriving on time, quick reply to e-mails) - Table 4

Very important	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Unimportant	Totally unimportant
50%	20%	20%	0%	10%

Seriousness in business (distinction between professional and private life) - Table 5

Very important	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Unimportant	Totally unimportant
30%	30%	30%	10%	0%

Educational criticism - Table 6

Very important	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Unimportant	Totally unimportant
30%	30%	40%	0%	0%

Elegance of dress (Clothes make/don't make a man) - Table 7

Very important	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Unimportant	Totally unimportant
40%	10%	40%	10%	0%

Teamwork - Table 8

Very important	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Unimportant	Totally unimportant
40%	30%	10%	10%	10%