Creating common ground: The role of metapragmatic expressions in BELF meeting interactions

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Abstract

Business English as a lingua franca (BELF) is gaining popularity in international business and research domains. In the framework of the socio-cognitive approach, this article examines the role of metapragmatic expressions (MPEs) in creating common ground (CG) in BELF meeting interactions. Based on the data from one business meeting drawn from the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English, it is found that the speakers mainly employ four types of MPEs, i.e. commentaries, speech-action descriptions, message glosses and evidentials, as pre-emptive or corrective strategies when they are aware of potential or actual problems or difficulties in interactions. MPEs are intended to activate shared sense (e.g. previous agreement, mutual experiences and company policy) and current sense (e.g. different or new perspectives, evaluations and sympathy) to construct emergent CG of knowledge and emergent CG of affiliation to achieve mutual understanding in BELF meeting interactions.

Keywords: Metapragmatic expressions; Socio-cognitive approach; Business English as a lingua franca; Common ground; Emergent common ground; Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English

1. Introduction

In English as a lingua franca (ELF) research, effectiveness of communication is characteristically defined in terms of achieving mutual understanding through co-creating meaning (e.g. Cogo and Dewey, 2006; Hülmbauer, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2011). ELF speakers use various explicitness strategies to both pre-empt and resolve problems of understanding (see Mauranen, 2007, 2012). This article explores the role of metapragmatic expressions (MPEs) in creating common ground (CG) in BELF meeting interactions. MPEs are linguistic expressions, such as I will tell you the details, this is an interesting point, and what I meant is, which explicitly display the speaker’s reflexive awareness of language use in meaning co-creation.

There have been a number of studies on metapragmatics over the past few decades. Caffi’s (1993) division of three senses lays the foundation for metapragmatics research, and this article addresses the third sense, i.e., “the investigation of that area of the speaker’s competence which reflects the judgments of appropriateness on one’s own and other people’s communicative behavior” (Caffi, 1993:2461). Metapragmatics in this sense is concerned with the speaker’s actual management of discourse (Caffi, 1993:2461).

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Little research has been done concerning metapragmatic awareness and metapragmatic indicators in BELF interactions. Some focus on the scope and level of metapragmatics (e.g. Caffi, 1984; Hübler, 2011; Mey, 1993/2001; Silverstein, 1993; Verschueren, 1999/2000, 2000). Others are concerned with the linguistic features and functions of particular metapragmatic indicators, mostly in everyday settings, and some in educational, political, media and computer-mediated contexts (for a review, see Hübler and Bublitz, 2007:21–25; Kleinke and Bös, 2015). In addition, previous studies have identified different types of metapragmatic indicators (e.g. Verschueren, 2000; Penz, 2007; Ran, 2013) and metadiscourse markers (e.g. Koppie, 1985) in daily, academic or other institutional settings. Furthermore, prior studies have not gone far enough to examine the functioning of MPEs in creating CG, although Caffi (2007) mentions common knowledge as a basis of discourse management, and others (e.g. Silverstein, 1993; Verschueren, 1999/2000; Penz, 2007; Caffi, 2007; Hübler and Bublitz, 2007) have pointed out the “regimenting”, “stipulative”, “monitoring”, “problem-solving”, and “interfering” functions of metapragmatic indicators. It seems there is a lack of account of metapragmatic awareness and its indicators in BELF interactions.

“Due to its lingua franca nature, BELF is essentially different from any native speaker English in many ways,” and a high level of strategic competence is necessary for coping with the communicative challenges posed by global business interactions involving diverse languages and cultures (Ehrenreich, 2016:137–138). The employment of MPEs is presumed to be explicit linguistic means or strategies to cope with these challenges and difficulties. A perspective combining social and cognitive aspects can provide a more comprehensive picture of MPEs in BELF interactions due to their complexity and high-stake nature. Thus this article adopts the socio-cognitive approach (SCA), particularly, its common ground theory, proposed and developed by Kecskes (2008, 2010, 2013) and Kecskes and Zhang (2009, 2013). Guided by previous research, based on the data from one business meeting interactions, I will identify major categories of MPEs present in the data, and then examine their role in creating CG, that is, how MPEs participate in CG construction to facilitate or shape ongoing interactions. I argue that MPEs are selected as explicit linguistic means to activate shared sense and current sense, which contribute to the creation of emergent CG to achieve mutual understanding in BELF meeting interactions. This article is expected to add to our knowledge of metapragmatic awareness and its indicators in BELF.

2. Defining metapragmatic expressions

Metapragmatics has much to do with reflexivity. Caffi (2007:83) defines metapragmatics as “the management of discourse, based on common knowledge and reflexivity.” She assumes the role of common knowledge in discourse management, but treats reflexivity and common knowledge equally as the basis of discourse management. It seems common knowledge is more fundamental and should be the basis of reflexivity. In addition, it is less useful to define reflexivity as “the management of discourse” in this article as MPEs reveal specific, goal-oriented motives and mechanisms in BELF meeting interactions. Hence it is necessary to go one step further to explore the functioning process of MPEs in this particular context.

From a functional perspective, Hübler and Bublitz (2007:6) define metapragmatics as “the pragmatics of actually performed meta-utterances that serve as a means of commenting on and interfering with ongoing discourse or text.” This definition concerns two major functions of metapragmatic utterances, i.e., commenting and interfering. And in a more detailed way, Smith and Liang (2007:172) define MPEs as “expressions which referred not to the content but how the audience might understand, use, or orient themselves to it.” This definition is concerned with the functions of MPEs to enhance mutual knowledge and understanding. Following this line of thought, but in a more exclusive way, this article argues that MPEs in BELF interactions indicate the speaker’s explicit attempt to create CG among participants from different first language and cultural backgrounds. These expressions manifest ELF speakers’ ability to discuss the communication they are involved in, as Caffi (2007:86) points out, “the speaker is both the involved participant and the observer of him/herself and of the interaction.” Hence MPEs are defined as reflective linguistic expressions explicitly displaying the speaker’s intentions to create CG in order to achieve mutual understanding in BELF interactions. Structurally, they appear in the form of sentences, clauses and formulaic/semi-formulaic expressions. Semantically, they do not directly deal with the issues or topics under discussion, but indicate the speaker’s intention to create CG, which is what BELF speakers are lacking. Consider the following example¹:

Extract 1 (S4, Austrian, S1 and S2, Korean, are talking about their regular meeting time.).
1 S4:<L1ger> ja? {yeah} </L1ger> (1) but you you: were not at <spel> i s m </spel> (1)
2 S2:<soft> no </soft>

¹ All data analyzed in this article are drawn from one business meeting from Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English.
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