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I think it is quite true to say that a definite language of business existed until quite recently, until perhaps 1939. By 'business English' I mean a kind of jargon that people in business used when writing to one another. Here is an instance:

'We beg to acknowledge receipt of your esteemed order of 24th ult.' (1)

This kind of jargon is, today, more or less dead; and in fact business English, as a subject of study in itself, can be said no longer to exist. It might be worthwhile to look at some reasons for this.

In the first place the basic concept of what a business is has, I think, changed since the last war (2). In Britain, for instance, a firm was judged on the reliability of its products, on the quality of its craftsmanship, and the traditions it embodied; I don't think there was much concept of the firm as an innovator, nor did firms pride themselves on their initiative and ability to be the first to jump into any market (3); in other words there was a sort of sluggishness, rather than dynamism (4). And this concept of business as a rather static affair found its expression in the actual language of business - traditional, dull and rigid in form. If, before the war, a business was seen as a concern with years of experience behind it, and if this was seen to be desirable in itself as such, this no longer holds good for today: the most successful recent industries have not only been quick to get off the ground but lay heavy stress on their dynamism; these are the industries which have come into existence as a result of technological and scientific breakthroughs and
discoveries: the man-made fibre, the computer and the aero-space industries are a case in point.

Breakthroughs in technology - and especially in communications - have had a direct effect on business language; that's to say, they have almost suppressed it. The fact is that people do not write letters very much nowadays, and letters are going to become much rarer things than they are already, not only in private (5) but also in business life. The three main forms of communication responsible are: the telephone and telex; the computer itself which can - in the case of big firms such as Unilever - supply orders, send invoices and give statements of account; and air-travel which - again in the case of big or medium firms - makes the letter unnecessary, or even undesirable, especially when it's a question of delicate business(6). What I am saying here is that communications have expanded more than anyone in pre-war days would have thought possible; and that since writing is a tedious business - one has to pick and choose words carefully, the reason for the stylised business English was to reduce language to acceptable formulae - people are no longer much interested in writing letters; and business English was essentially a written form of the language - no one has ever spoken like a 1939 business letter.

Some businesses, of course, still write in the stilted pre-war way; but these businesses - generally banks and insurance companies - do so because they want to create, through the language they use, the impression of reliability and even conservatism; so that their customers will feel they are dealing with a concern that is solid, respectable and well-established, and will not go bankrupt overnight.

Taking business as a whole, though, I think one can safely say that the business English that it was possible to learn from text-books (and here I mean text-books designed for native
speakers as well: as a jargon, business English had to be learned) is now more or less dead. This jargon was quite easy to learn. As I've suggested, it was basically a string of ready-made formulae and clichés which the writer could manipulate to suit his purposes. Any competent secretary could answer a letter without seeing it: the boss would say, ‘We messed up an order again’, and the secretary could write:

Dear Sir,

We beg to acknowledge receipt of your communication of 24th inst. and wish to express our most sincere regrets for the inconvenience inadvertently caused you through circumstances beyond our control.

The matter you refer to is receiving the closest and most urgent attention, and we trust that the steps we have taken to remedy the situation will meet with your approval.

Assuring you of our best attention at all times,

We remain,

Yours faithfully (7)

Consisting as it did of impersonal phrases, the one stuck on after the other, it is hardly surprising that the ready-made, printed letter (like the Railway Chairman’s) with its printed signature, that sometimes looks as though it might have been written in ink, has supplanted the handmade one: there is no need for anyone actually to have to sit down and write it (8). The printed question & answer form, the bureaucrat’s best friend and the darling of such sinister authorities as the Inland Revenue (Income Tax) is also widely used.

But this doesn’t mean to say that no one writes business letters any more - or talks shop - because of course they do; and this fact tends to disappoint our students, who were very
happy to learn that ‘business English’ no longer existed and that this meant one subject less to study, or pretend to study. The difference between the 1939 letter and today’s is that the one was, more often than not, impersonal whereas the other is likely to be personal. And this is where the English widely used in business today starts getting really difficult, because although the letter may be personal we all know that we need to write to some people (say, friends) in one way; whereas we need to write to others (say, people we don’t know well, if at all) in quite another way. Let’s suppose that someone we know has done something stupid and for one reason or another we want to write and tell him this. If he is a close friend we can write, ‘You were a bloody fool to do it’. But if he is not a close friend, then this language is somewhat too direct and ‘Perhaps it was a little unwise of you to do it’ would be a safer way of writing.

Here we have two questions: the one a matter of tact or common sense (or lack of it), the other linguistic and the expression of the first. On the linguistic level it is a question of ‘register’; that’s to say ‘What words to use in an acceptable way according to the situation’. Since, however, the linguistic level is inseparable from the ‘personal’ one, it should be clear that ‘register’ can’t be taught to people who haven’t the slightest idea of the conventions of social behaviour; but luckily it is very easy to teach the Japanese student what ‘register’ is because the Japanese, as a people, have a very nice sense of what is and what is not acceptable at all levels of social behaviour. Here, then, we do not need to explain at any great length to our students just why ‘register’ is essential: we can concentrate on the forms that the language itself takes.

Roughly speaking, we can divide English into two main kinds: Formal and Informal. By Formal I mean the language of most political speeches, government announcements, text books
and so on, and to some extent the language of this article itself; as a general rule we use Formal language when the question of a personal relationship between the writer (or speaker) and his reader (or audience) either does not arise or is irrelevant: when the government announces increased taxes on personal income it is not thinking of the people it addresses as individuals; it follows, then, that Formal English is essentially impersonal (9). Informal English, on the other hand, is personal in that it is the way in which people speak to one another as individuals - the language of everyday, perhaps friendly conversation. It will, then, be quite clear that the language is being misused when the speaker or writer uses Formal language in what is a personal, even friendly situation (10).

As far as Formal English is concerned, our students already have some knowledge of the subject, although - like the overworked example of Monsieur Jourdain - they do not realise it: the texts used for the teaching of English in school and at University are essentially Formal; and in the case of literary works tend to display a rather outdated English that would nowadays be considered as more Formal than not. This fact simplifies our job to some extent, because by taking our students’ knowledge of Formal English as a basis we can compare and contrast. I say ‘to some extent’ because the subject is a complicated one in terms of language, if only because no two native-speakers are likely to agree all the time on what is Formal or Informal (11); and as far as I know no one has ever written a text-book about this subject, possibly because to be of any practical use a text-book would have to be so unwieldy as to make it - paradoxically - impractical. Just the same, we can draw some useful guide-lines and in a further article - because colleagues with whom I’ve discussed this subject have shown some interest (12) - I hope to do this.
For the moment, though, I should like to sum up what I’ve been saying and perhaps make my point of view clearer. Now that the impersonal business jargon of pre-war days has fallen into disuse; and now that contacts in business tend to be phrased in personal, rather than impersonal, terms; our students who will go into business need to be able to express themselves - in speech and writing - in an informal way. There is, then, I think, a need for the teaching of 'register' to be an integral part of any English course followed by Economics students (13).

To end on another paradox, I think that the recent boom in technology - which many deplore for its depersonalising effects - has led in English to far more emphasis being placed on the personal element than was the case before the boom took place. The language of business has become more 'human'; and I don't think it would be too hard to make out a case explaining this in terms of people - perhaps unconsciously - resisting the impersonal forces that have been unleashed; but this would be beyond the scope of this article, as they say.

Notes

1) In everyday English: 'Thank you for your order of 24th
_ult_ = 'last month'.

2) Dr Donald Schon rather tediously examines other related aspects in his 1970 (BBC) Reith Lectures. (BBC Publications, 1970)

3) One reason is that many British firms had a ready-made market in the Empire, etc., so there was no need to be adventurous. But American firms, too, as Dr Schon points out, were far more complacent than they are today.

4) It is interesting to note that one famous British firm that prides itself on the quality of its craftsmanship and traditions
- Rolls-Royce - is, at the time of writing (January 1971) almost bankrupt. That this is so is the result of its taking on too many projects, while maintaining its high standards, in an attempt to unite tradition with dynamism.

5) Literary critics examining volumes of letters written as recently ago as the 1920's are amazed, today, to see how much and how often people wrote to one another. See Clive James' review of the Carrington letters in The Listener, 10th December, 1970, page 818.

6) I don't know how widely the cassette recorder is used instead of the letter, but I should think it will become very widely accepted in the near future: it's much quicker to record a message than write one. Dictaphone typists would be advised to think of getting other iobs.

7) A very old and well-known joke is about the man who is bitten by bugs in the sleeping car of a train. He writes to the Chairman of the Railway Company to complain and gets a letter back—on very nice paper—full of the Chairman's regrets, and assuring him that this is the first time this has ever happened and will never happen again. The poor victim is quite happy to see that his complaint has been taken seriously, and even a little flattered to receive a letter from such a distinguished and busy man. Then a slip of paper falls from the envelope. It is a short note from the Chairman to his secretary and says, 'Send him the Bug Letter'.

8) It must not be assumed that all business letters are answered. The costs of running a business are high and when economics dictate—for instance when a detailed answer is called for and the amount at stake is, in the firm's opinion, negligible—the sensible businessman throws the letter away.

9) The impersonal Passive Voice can be invaluable when an unpopular decision has to be announced, and British politicians know this. The Chancellor of the Exchequer says, 'It has been decided to increase the standard rate of income tax':
the impersonal 'it', not the Chancellor, can be blamed for this measure. On the other hand, no Chancellor in his right mind would announce, 'It has been decided to lower the standard rate of income tax': he would say 'I have decided...', in order to give people a chance to thank him and say what a fine chap he is.

10) This is one reason why the Speech Contests held throughout Japan do positive harm to those students taking part in them. The orators learn to use a highly Formal English which they then use in private conversation. Some of my students who have taken part in Speech Contests talk to me and to each other as if they were addressing - badly - some vast public meeting; and this way of speaking is not only absurd but can be offensive, since individuals do not, as a rule, like to be spoken to as if they were some anonymous crowd.

11) I think that 'however,' 'nevertheless' and 'yet' (= 'however') are rather formal; but a lot of native-speakers don't.

12) I ought to reassure my colleagues that it doesn't matter if they use Formal English when the Informal language would be more appropriate. People expect University teachers to speak in a stilted way; the assumption is that those who spend their lives with books will acquire speech habits from them. And in any case, people as a rule think that all University teachers are mad.

13) It should, I think, be taught from the beginning; but I've never yet seen any material which attempts to deal with the subject, even obliquely.