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SOCIOPRAGMATIC CALIBRATION OF PREVENTIVE SPEECH ACTS IN ENGLISH INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSE

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INTRODUCTION

Institutional communication places two demands on a warning. The message must be clear enough for the addressee to recognize the danger and perform a protective action, while its form must correspond to the participants’ roles, authority and institutional norms. The same risk may therefore be expressed as an order, official rule, recommendation, question or indirect indication. The choice depends on the severity of danger, the participants and the basis that makes the speaker’s intervention legitimate.

Speech act theory made it possible to treat an utterance as an action rather than merely as a description of a state of affairs [1]. In J.R. Searle’s classification, a warning combines an assertive component, which communicates a possible adverse consequence, with a directive component aimed at changing the addressee’s behaviour [2]. This combination is fundamental to a preventive act: the speaker reports a risk and simultaneously encourages the addressee to prevent it. Studies of English warnings confirm that the relationship between these components varies according to discourse type and communicative situation [3].

The aim of this thesis is to determine how institutional status, source of authority, social distance and danger urgency regulate the directness of preventive speech acts in English. The material consists of the English examples and analytical classifications presented in A.B. Asadov’s dissertation. The discussion focuses on functional distinctions among the forms examined in that study and does not introduce new quantitative data.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The analysis combines contextual, pragmasemantic, communicative-pragmatic and discourse approaches. Each example is examined to identify the source of danger, the anticipated negative consequence, the required protective action, the participants’ status and the basis on which the speaker can direct the addressee’s behaviour. The degree of directness is then established by distinguishing an overt imperative or prohibition, a modally mitigated recommendation, an impersonal institutional construction and a warning inferred from context.

This procedure is necessary because grammatical form alone does not determine illocutionary force. The utterance You must not enter the laboratory without protective equipment is both a direct prohibition and a preventive act because the restriction is motivated by a risk of harm. By contrast, The building is structurally unsafe reports a dangerous condition, but the addressee must recover the expected protective action from context. In both cases the preventive purpose is retained, although the means of influence differs.

SOURCES OF PREVENTIVE AUTHORITY

Institutional status establishes the right to issue binding instructions, yet the dissertation material demonstrates that not every warning can be explained by a stable hierarchy. Following E. Goffman’s

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account of the participant's social face [4] and P. Brown and S. Levinson's politeness theory [5], directness is viewed as a potential restriction on the addressee's autonomy. At the same time, avoidance of a direct form in the presence of a real threat may reduce the intelligibility of the message. Strategy selection is therefore governed by a balance between protecting face and securing immediate action.

Five sources of preventive authority are distinguished in the study: institutional, epistemic, situational, moral or caring, and collective. The distinction is important because the same modal form may receive a different interpretation. Must uttered by a manager within the limits of official competence rests on institutional authority. The same modal verb in a physician's speech derives its force from specialist knowledge, whereas a brief Watch out! from a bystander is legitimized by the immediate detection of danger.

DIRECTNESS AND SOCIAL DISTANCE

In institutional discourse, status relations form three basic configurations: downward, upward and equal-status communication. In downward communication, a direct imperative is acceptable when the action falls within the speaker's responsibilities and concerns safety. Formal power, however, does not eliminate the need for justification. Stop the machine; the pressure is above the safe limit is understood not as an arbitrary order but as a protective instruction because the reason is stated immediately.

An upward warning requires a different linguistic adjustment. A subordinate who detects a risk may possess a situational or epistemic advantage but must still take the addressee's status into account. Instead of the categorical You are wrong, the speaker may choose You may want to reconsider the deadline or If I may, there appears to be a safety risk. Mitigation does not remove the preventive purpose; it reduces the threat to the addressee's social face and facilitates acceptance of the information. In V.I. Karasik's typology of institutional and personal discourse, status and role expectations are treated as a defining feature of the communicative format [6].

Among equals, the choice depends on closeness and urgency. Careful! and Watch out! are natural between acquaintances when danger is immediate. In a non-urgent situation, the same preventive task may be expressed as advice, You should back up your files, or through a causal explanation, Do not open the attachment because it may contain malicious software. The less shared experience the participants have, the more important it becomes to state both the danger and the required action explicitly.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that directness is not a permanent marker of high status. It increases when danger is imminent, the possible consequence is serious and the time available for interpretation is limited. Under such conditions, even a lower-status participant may temporarily gain the right to use a strict form because of specialist knowledge or direct perception of risk. When the danger is remote and discussion remains possible, modality, conditionality, argumentation and respect for the addressee's autonomy become more prominent.

The novelty of the interpretation lies in combining status direction and source of authority within one analytical scheme. This explains why the same grammatical form receives different pragmatic evaluations. An imperative used by a physician, dispatcher or safety officer is justified within professional competence, whereas the same form used by an outsider requires a situational basis. An impersonal construction, in turn, may reduce personal pressure while retaining strong obligation.

In intercultural institutional communication, differences in politeness norms and acceptable directness complicate this relationship. The rapport-management approach developed by H. Spencer-

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Oatey and D. Kádár [7] explains why a formally correct phrase may seem excessively harsh or insufficiently definite. A public warning should identify the message source, the danger, its place and time, and the protective action. This structure reduces dependence on the addressee's cultural background.

CONCLUSION

The form of an English preventive speech act in institutional discourse is determined by the combined effect of four factors: the participants' status, the source of authority, social distance and danger urgency. None of these factors operates in isolation.

Institutional, epistemic, situational, moral or caring, and collective authority legitimize intervention in the addressee's behaviour in different ways. High urgency increases directness, whereas the availability of time for discussion makes modal, conditional and explanatory forms appropriate.

The practical value of the proposed scheme lies in the possibility of assessing a warning not only by its grammatical form, but also by the correspondence among the source of the message, the nature of the danger and the relationship between participants. This is relevant to the drafting of instructions, medical recommendations, administrative notices and public-safety messages.

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