

Exploring Communication Strategies in Kazakhstani and US Sales Promotional Letters: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

Aliya Aimoldina ^{a,*}, Sholpan Zharkynbekova^b and Damira Akynova^c

12 Baurzhan Momysuly street, office 151, Astana, Kazakhstan

^a a_aliya_86@mail.ru, ^b zsholpan@rambler.ru, ^c mirada-86@mail.ru

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. In the context of the internationalization and globalization of the economy, it is becoming increasingly important to better understand the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic variations conveyed through business persuasive correspondence. The growing number of international companies and joint ventures in the Republic of Kazakhstan indicates the increasing use of English, along with Kazakh and Russian, as one of the main mediums of communication. Nowadays, business correspondence written in Kazakh, Russian and English is extensively used in the Kazakhstani business context. However, little research has been done in this area so far. This cross-cultural study examines the communication strategies employed by Kazakhstani and American business professionals in their sales promotional letters. Since business communication in contemporary Kazakhstan has been shaped, and continues to be shaped, under the influence of three languages, 55 Kazakh, 62 Russian and 50 English sales letters were analyzed and compared in this research. The findings show that communication strategies differ considerably between Kazakhstani and US professionals. The diversity includes some cultural-bound discourse patterns and cultural-specific textual features, many of which can be traced to interference from the Kazakh and Russian languages and cultures. In addition, the language, format, organization, and tone of business correspondence reflected the values of the writers and their environment. The study makes an attempt to raise an awareness of Kazakhstani business specialists of differences in persuasive writing across languages and cultures, worth noting for developing cross-cultural understanding and communication strategies for effective intercultural business interactions in the dynamic business environment of the 21st century.

1. Introduction

Communicating is a need in today's business world. If professionals are not able to express their ideas appropriately, it will be difficult for them to reach positive agreements while operating internationally. What is more, this process can sometimes be altered by intercultural or international misunderstandings. Doing business with people from other cultures can be a fairly frustrating activity [1]. Therefore, the study of business persuasive correspondence regulating commercial relations of business partners has become especially crucial under present-day conditions of expanding international business contacts. In accordance with many researchers [2,3,4], the investigation of persuasive messages in relation to business merits much attention, since business persuasive correspondences, including sales promotional letters, are "a major medium through which business

companies convey their brands, ...create a catalyst effect in boosting sales volume, ...have ever affected our buying decisions as consumers, ...enhance cross-cultural intellectual exchange, [and]...contribute to modern civilization [5:354].

Since Kazakhstan gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, investment in and trade with Kazakhstan has received growing attention from all over the world. Following the independence, Kazakhstani economy has demonstrated a remarkable rate of growth in the recent years. This trend is likely to continue in the next decade as a result of the country's economic reforms and strategic development plans, which attract foreign direct investment to Kazakhstan. Furthermore, the abundance of valuable natural resources along with the prospects from oil reveals a bright outlook for the future economic condition in Kazakhstan. Consequently, Kazakhstan is now engaged in international commercial activities with more than one hundred and seventy countries and has trading and economic agreements with more than fifty other countries under a "Most-Favoured Nations (MFN)" regime [6]. The growing number of international companies and joint ventures in the Republic of Kazakhstan indicates the increasing use of English, along with Kazakh and Russian, as one of the main mediums of communication.

The purpose of this study is to examine similarities and differences between three corpora - Kazakh, Russian and US business persuasive correspondence, i.e. sales promotional letters, particularly, in the areas of communicative strategies. Despite the presence of a quite wide enough spectrum of the works considering various aspects of the Kazakhstani business discourse, there is a high need for further research into the various features of business correspondence. The research is aimed at a correct perception of written business correspondence, taking into account national-cultural features (in this case English, Kazakh and Russian cultures), which could contribute to a pragmatical success in local and multinational business contexts.

2. Business Culture in Kazakhstan and the United States

The foundations of the unique Kazakh culture can be traced back to the country's rich history and significant geographical location in Eurasia. Throughout the history, Kazakh lands were at the centre of the major trade routes such as the Silk Road and provided significant geopolitical value to many civilizations that settled in the area. Thus, the Kazakh culture evolved as a synthesis of a diverse group of ethnic and social influences in the region. The modern Kazakh culture carries elements from both the country's native Turkic identity and its Soviet legacy.

Many cross-cultural psychologists and cultural anthropologists [7,8,9] have long tried to develop formal tools of analysis for understanding cultural differences. Therefore, in this research we will provide a brief comparative analysis of the Kazakhstani and U.S. cultures based on the most recent Hofstede's five-dimensional approach, which consist of (1) Power distance index (PDI), (2) Individualism (IDV) versus collectivism, (3) Masculinity (MAS) versus femininity, (4) Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI), and (5) Long-term orientation (LTO), vs. short-term orientation [8].

According to Hofstede's investigations, the United States scores low on the Power distance dimension. In American organizations, hierarchy is established for convenience, superiors are ideally always accessible, and managers rely on individual employees and teams for their expertise. Information is shared frequently among managers and employees. At the same time, communication is informal, direct and participatory. As for Kazakhstan, it scores high on the PDI dimension since the relationships in the workplace are very formal and hierarchical [10,11]. The long history of extreme centralization of power before, during, and after the Soviet period is reflected in a contemporary top-down managerial style. The discrepancy between the less and the more powerful members of the society leads to a great importance of status symbols. In addition, respect for authority and rank as well as a high appreciation of seniority can find its roots in ancient Nomadic culture

The next dimension identifies cultures as individualistic or collectivistic. The United States is a highly individualistic culture. People are expected to be independent and self-reliant. The culture is

also high in geographic mobility: Americans tend to move across the country while pursuing education and making a career. In the business world, employees are expected to display initiative. In contrast, Kazakhstan can be characterized as a very collectivistic society in which each member of the community has its role. In such societies, people belong to groups or communities that take care of them in exchange for loyalty. Kinship relations and family ties are very strong in Kazakhstani society. Relationships are personal and authentic. Having “connections” is crucial to obtaining information, getting introduced to certain social ranks, or getting a better job position [10].

The third dimension characterizes cultures as being masculine or feminine. This dimension has been the most controversial of the five dimensions of national culture [8]. The United States is considered a masculine society. According to Hofstede [8], societies with a high masculinity index are driven by competition, achievement, and success. Americans tend to display and talk openly and proudly about one’s achievements. As a result, effective leadership behavioural traits are perceived to be mainly masculine in their nature.

According to Mukazhanova’s analysis [10] Kazakhstan would not score high in the masculinity dimension. It is not usual for Kazakhstanians to stress their personal achievements and capacities or use assertive methods of negotiation and managing. Usually, there is a strict hierarchy at the workplace that makes relationships between managers and employees clear. However, national cultures are more complex and in many cases include both masculine and feminine characteristics. This is especially true for developing countries with transition economies where managerial practices are constantly transforming and change faster than in the countries where business cultures have a more stable nature. For this dimension, Kazakhstan is proposed in the middle between masculinity and femininity.

The fourth dimension characterizes cultures as uncertainty avoidant or uncertainty accepting. American society is what one would describe as “uncertainty accepting”. Consequently, there is a larger degree of acceptance for new ideas, innovative products, and a willingness to try something new or different, whether it pertains to technology, business practices, etc. Americans tend to be fairly tolerant of ideas or opinions from anyone and allow freedom of expression.

For Kazakhstan, the UAI score will be significantly higher than for the U.S. The Kazakh system of complex bureaucracies is designed to avoid uncertainty. It affects relationships in the workplace that remain very formal and distant. It is common for Kazakhstan to put emphasis on detailed planning and relationship building. The result of negotiations depends a lot on relationships - building. This also explains the importance of having “connections”.

Finally, the United States is characterized as a short-term oriented culture. Given this perspective, American businesses measure their performance on a short-term basis, with profit and loss statements being issued on a quarterly basis. This also drives individuals to strive for immediate results rather than to seek long-term impact. For Kazakhstan, the LTO score should be relatively high since emphasis is put on building relationships and maintaining them to continue family businesses in the future [10,11].

Thus, a detailed analysis of the Kazakh culture should be integral to crafting sound business strategies for multinational companies that plan to enter into this highly promising market. Perhaps, one of the most critical elements of the Kazakh business culture is building and maintaining personal relationships and networks [12]. For Kazakh business people, establishing trust and strong bonds with the business partners is very important in any level of business. Such intangible aspects of business are considered more valuable than the actual contracts. For this reason, in contrast to the Western business etiquette, negotiations tend to continue for a longer period of time until close relationships are built with the other parties. Besides, the Kazakh society reflects the characteristics of a vertical culture [12]. In the business context, this means that Kazakh companies tend to follow a centralized approach of management. Understanding the Kazakh culture is necessary for multinational businesses to avoid costly mistakes and achieve success in this unfamiliar market environment.

3. Methodology

In this study, the business correspondence which is under analysis is written by international business partners based in the USA and is produced by Kazakhstani business professionals working in international, national and foreign companies in Kazakhstan.

3.1. Data collection

In general, between December 2011 and May 2013, 167 sales letters were collected, including 55 Kazakh, 62 Russian and 50 English sales. The collected sales letters turned out to be written in 3 financial, 3 manufacturing, and 4 service companies. 6 of which were located in Astana, 1 in Almaty, 2 in Atyrau and 1 in Aktau.

3.2. Data Analysis Procedure

The review of linguistic literature devoted to the cross-cultural analysis of business correspondence showed a number of theories and concepts relating to persuasion and politeness strategies. Thus, Powell's [13] study analyses the contributions of applied psychologists and early business-English writers to three areas: sales letters and the power of persuasion, the "you" viewpoint, and the "five C's" of business-letter writing. She examines each area from a historical standpoint of language use in American business letters during 1905-1920. According to Powell [13], Cody's [14] books on business letter writing are among the first studies that justify the concept of written business persuasion and the notion of you-orientation in business letters. Cody [14] provides three criteria for writing an effective sales letter: it must be persuasive, it must employ positive suggestion, and the writer of such a letter should focus on his/her projected reader. According to Powell [13], Cody's [14] theory of reader adaptation led to the establishment of the "you" viewpoint (similar to what Jenkins and Hinds [15] called "reader-orientation"), whereby the writer communicates from the reader's perspective. Another well-known rule is called the five C's of business-letter writing: (1) clearness, (2) conciseness, (3) completeness, (4) correctness, and (5) courtesy, which 'were first seen in Hotchkiss and Drew's 1916 text, and are found in most business writing textbooks that followed' (Powell 1991: 41). Powell [13] concludes that the use of power of persuasion, the "you" viewpoint and the five C's initially established in the 1900s have influenced the persuasive writing of contemporary business letters.

Studies on persuasive business correspondence [16,17,18] adopt the concept of rhetoric originated in approximately 335 BC. by Aristotle [19] who points out three elements of western persuasive rhetoric which influence belief and action: logos (reason and evidence), ethos (character and claims), and pathos (emotion). Zhu [16] regards these three elements as persuasive strategies whereas Campbell [17] and Hyland [18] regard them as rhetorical conventions or appeals of persuasive discourse.

With regard to rhetorical strategies, the researchers often use Bhatia's move analysis (1993). This method allows for revealing rhetorical features in business correspondence English and Chinese business correspondence [16], English and Thai [20], English and Taiwan [21], etc. This analysis implies there are seven moves in each sales promotion letter including three obligatory moves and four optional moves, as follows: Move 1 - Establishing credentials; Move 2 - Introducing the offer (Offering the product or service; Essential detailing of the offer; Indicating value of the offer); Move 3 - Offering incentives; Move 4 - Enclosing documents; Move 5 - Soliciting response; Move 6 - Using pressure tactics; Move 7 - Ending politely [2].

From our point of view, Bhatia's move analysis is the most approved, reliable and optimal research method, capable of demonstrating peculiarities in the business correspondence written by native and non-native speakers. Therefore, followed by Bhatia [2] we use this method of analysis of rhetorical structures (e.g. moves, structural representation).

4. Results and Discussion

The result of comparison of the sales promotional letters written by representatives of Kazakh, Russian and English communicative cultures testifies that the texts of the collected sales letters show both similarities and differences in all the aspects and text levels being analyzed.

4.1 Organization of a sales letter

In general, Kazakhstani citizens used the indented style for business letters both in the Kazakh and Russian languages; the blocked style was rarely used. The date and the office number of the letter, even in blocked letters, tend to be typed on the left side of the page. The inside address in Kazakh and Russian letters is typed on the right-hand side. The zip code precedes the name of the city by Kazakhstani postal regulations. A typical arrangement in the Kazakh letter looks as follows:

№ 42-3/2 «16» сәуір 2013 ж.

Қазақстан Республикасы
010000 Астана қаласы
С.Сейфуллин көшесі, 107-үй
«Шұғыла» ЖШС директорына

Құрметті Асқар Асаубайұлы мырза!

In an English letter, this information would be arranged as follows:

The Director “Shugyla” LTD
107 Seifullin street
010000 Astana
Republic of Kazakhstan

April 16, 2013

Dear Mr. Askar Kanybekov:

In Kazakh and Russian letters the salutation is followed by an exclamation mark rather than a colon as is the case in the United States. Salutations are more formal. Typical salutations are:

Kazakh: *Аса құрметті (name) мырза/ханым! Құрметті (first name and patronymic name)! Қымбатты (name) мырза/ханым! Қадірлі (name) мырза/ханым!*

Russian: *Уважаемый Иван Степанович! Дорогой Данияр Ахметович! Господин Директор! Многоуважаемый Михаил Васильевич!*

First names both in Kazakh and Russian are used very seldom in business correspondence even if the writer and reader know each other quite well. English business specialists should stay on a formal basis using last name or a first name with a patronymic name and “*Сіз*” or “*Сіздер*” in Kazakh and “*Вы*” in Russian, which are the polite form of “*you*”. First names should be used only if the Kazakhstani people specifically ask that first names be used. Even if first names are used, the Kazakhstani citizens often continue to use “*Сіз*” or “*Вы*” rather than “*сен*” or “*ты*”.

The English business professionals, who want to be on a friendly basis immediately, may have a hard time and actually turn off potential business partners with his or her outgoing approach. It is important to recognize that formal style of address does not necessarily mean disinterest, coldness, and unfriendliness. Personal relationships take a long time to develop in Kazakhstan.

The analysis of sales letters in Kazakh and Russian showed that Kazakhstani citizens can simply finish a business letter by pointing out only their requisites, or using such phrases as:

“С уважением, генеральный директор Б. Ахметов” [‘Yours faithfully, the Director General B. Akhmetov’], Құрметпен - Алматы мақта-мата комбинаты директоры Ш.Болатұлы, etc.

As for English sales promotional letters, it is obligatory to meet the requirements of selected greetings with a form of ending the letter. In the rules of etiquette of a business letter in English, the salutation *Dear Mr. Lindell* requires the form *Yours sincerely* at the end, and a greeting to the

addressee, the name of whom is unknown or to the group: *Dear Madam* or *Dear Sirs* require *Yours faithfully*. One more etiquette rule connected with the form of the address is an address to the woman - to the business partner without exact instructions on her marital status and a preferable choice of the form as *Ms Hartford*.

Based on Bhatia's rhetorical move analysis, the comparative analysis has shown that all seven moves are in most cases found in the sales letters written by American business professionals, whilst in Kazakhstani sales promotional letters all seven rhetorical moves are absent. Establishing credentials (Move 1) and Introducing the offer (Move 2) are present absolutely in each letter both in Kazakhstani and US letters.

It should be noted that such an obligatory pattern as Move 5 - Soliciting response in 60% of Kazakhstani business professionals' letters is absent, while in the letters of native speakers of English the given rhetorical move is found in each sales letter. It is possible to explain this by the fact that in business texts of native speakers of English, considerable attention is given to "feedback", that is the aspiration of the sender to underline the importance of the addressee's reaction and, thereby to induce him/her to respond, having increased the probability of repeated contact. It is known that in comparison with the representatives of another cultural background in the English business culture, addressees and senders are usually individuals (parents, tenants, house owners, owners of credit cards, etc). The given addressees make up a considerable share of the recipients of information letters, sales letters and requests, etc.

As a result of cross-cultural comparison, it was noticed that in American sales letters Move 6 - Using Pressure Tactics was used more often than in the letters in Kazakh and Russian. Bhatia [2: 55] states that the main focus of using pressure tactics is to push the already inclined or half-inclined customer to take an immediate decision. This move is found in 45 out of 50 US sales letters and only 5 out of 55 Kazakh sales letters and 10 out of 62 sales letters in Russian. It is mainly realised by the expression of urgency that forces the reader to take a prompt action. For example,

Come and join us today at LA fitness Finchley for our exclusive offer; get 2 months FREE plus, the rest of this month free! But hurry, as this fantastic offer must end TODAY!*

Please note that the application deadline is six weeks in advance of the start of each course.

Using pressure tactics is aimed at showing the limitations of the offer in term of quantity (e. g. 'due to the limited number of available seats') and often with reference to a limited period of time as in 'this fantastic offer must end TODAY'.

4.2 General Tone of a letter

The differences also become apparent in the use of the letter's mood types, formulaic expressions and lexical choice, which indicates different degrees of formality. Kazakh business professionals use a more formal, official, cold style of communication, whereas English business professionals quickly move on to a more friendly and partnership type of relationship, which is reflected in the choice of a particular language in business letters. Kazakhstani business letters generally use the declarative mood type and their use of the imperative seems to be limited. The English speakers' letters use a more imperative mood, either with or without the politeness marker 'please'. They also use many more polar interrogatives and modal-initial interrogatives in the request sentences. Most sales letters written by Kazakhstani business professionals make an extensive use of formulaic or "stock" expressions especially those concerning gratitude, appreciation and anticipation.

Generally, the content of sales promotional letters is the same for both countries. However, some differences exist in the style and in the organization of the letters. In most cases, English sales letters start with the main first. The letter goes from specific points to more general ones. In Kazakhstan, letters often go from general to more specific points.

The analysis shows that in sales promotional letters, specifically, in Kazakh and Russian business correspondence, the authors' personality is presented by using singular "I" or plural "we". It should be noted that in these letters there was also a tendency of the writer's depersonalization or to express the unity with the addressee. On the linguistic level it is shown by the rejection to use the 1st person singular pronoun, but by the increasing use of the pronoun of the 1st person plural "we":

Уважаемый господин X,

Мы подтверждаем получение вашего письма No.04-03-6/361. ... Однако мы проведем более детальный осмотр, как только мы будем иметь в распоряжении укомплектованный подъемный кран ...

[Dear Mr. X,

We acknowledge receipt of your letter No.04-03-6/361. ... However we will carry out a closer inspection once we have the crane complete...]

“№638 партиясының төлемі тауардың Астанаға келу күнінде біздің фирма арқылы жүргізілетінін мәлімдейміз” [‘We inform you that the payment of the order #638 must be paid at the day of the good’s arrival to Astana’].

However, at present in sales letters (mostly in English sales letters and less in Kazakhstani ones) there is a tendency as a co-called “*you-attitude*” [13] similar to what Jenkins and Hinds [22] called “reader-orientation”, when the writer communication from the reader’s perspectives to draw and maintain his/her attention. For example,

“You could send your request through mail, email or even send fax, whatever you think is convenient for you.”

“You may call me at 800-555-9875 if you have any questions or concerns. Your continued patronage is important to us.”

According to Bhatia [2], the writer can either highlight the expertise and achievements of the company or indicate his/her perception of the interests and needs of the potential customer while implying that the company can fulfil those interests and needs. The former approach often uses the “we” orientation [2:50] whereas the latter frequently use the “you” orientation [2: 50].

As we can see from the focus or key terms, the writer tries to create a good impression of the company by emphasising its worldwide leading status as a major company which provides high quality work and service. The “*we-orientation*” is used to convey this message to the reader.

The you-orientation is, as in Bhatia’s [2] findings, used when the writer tries to express the interests and needs of the potential customer while implying that his product or service can fulfil those interests and needs.

5. Conclusions

To sum up, business discourse in contemporary Kazakhstan has been shaped, and continues to be shaped, under the influence of three languages: Kazakh, Russian and English. The presence of three languages in the common communicative area of business discourse gives rise to the questions considered in this paper. The comparison of collected sales promotional letters show that, overall, Kazakh, Russian and English business letters share similarities, but there are also many differences.

At present, there are very few studies on written business discourse in Kazakhstan. This study is a small cross-cultural study with an aim to shed light on communicative strategies used in sales promotion letters by the business professionals of different cultural backgrounds. The findings suggest that Bhatia’s [2] pattern of moves does not entirely represent the rhetorical moves and strategies in all sales promotion letters.

According to our analysis and discussion of the findings, this could result from some cultural-specific writing patterns. Perhaps our data, which has been gathered quite recently, represent new trends in Kazakhstani linguistics of sales promotion writing across cultures. The study makes an attempt to raise an awareness of Kazakhstani business specialists of differences in persuasive writing across languages and cultures, worth noting for developing cross-cultural understanding and communication strategies for effective intercultural business interactions in the dynamic business environment of the 21st century.

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