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POLITE VOICE OF BRITISH COMPANIES: CORPUS BASED STUDY IN E-PRESS RELEASES

The main purpose of this article is to analyze how politeness strategies are applied in British e-press releases and to assess its effectiveness. The analysis of the e-press releases in the field of business is always attractive to the linguistics as it is adapted language to the social changes and its persuasive intention is always observable. The data were collected from the official website of very famous and old British company Unilever and were analyzed with the help of automotive data analyzing programs, which adds novelty and relevance to the research. Applying computer assisted programs led to gain accurate results. This descriptive qualitative research aims to apply Brown and Levinson's theories of politeness strategy to trace certain pragmatics in e-press releases. The results show that e-press releases employ positive politeness strategies massively and this is because e-press releases are constructed considering cultural features of target audience. This tool works effectively to set positive image of the company.

Key words: e-press releases, corpus linguistics, positive politeness strategy.

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Британдық компаниялардың сыпайы даусы: электронды пресс-релиздерді корпустық зерттеу

Бұл мақаланың негізгі мақсаты британдық электронды пресс-релиздерде сыпайылық стратегияларының қалай қолданылатынын талдау және оның тиімділігін бағалау болып табылады. Бизнес саласындағы электрондық пресс-релизді талдау тіл білімі үшін әрқашан қызықты, өйткені ол әлеуметтік өзгерістерге бейімделген тілдің көмегімен құрастырылады. Электронды пресс-релиздерде автордың иландырушы ниеті әрқашан ашық байқалады. Зерттеу материалы өте танымал және беделді британдық Unilever компаниясының ресми сайтынан алынды және олар деректерді автоматты талдау бағдарламаларының көмегімен талданды. Мұндай автоматты талдау бағдарламаларын қолдану адами фактор әсерінен болатын қателіктердің алдын алуға көмектеседі, әрі зерттеудің жаңашылдығы мен өзектілігін арттырады. Деректерді талдау барысында компьютерлік бағдарламаларды қолдану нақты, әрі біржақты нәтижелерге қол жеткізуге жол ашты. Бұл зерттеу Браун мен Левинсонның позитивті сыпайылық стратегиясы теорияларын қолдана отырып электрондық пресс-релиздердегі прагматикалық ойды анықтауды көздейді. Электрондық пресс-релиздер мақсатты аудиторияның мәдени ерекшеліктерін ескере отырып құрастырылғандықтан, позитивті сыпайылық стратегияларының жаппай қолданылуы компанияның оң имиджін орнату үшін тиімді екенін зерттеудің нәтижесі көрсетті. Оған қоса зерттеудің пәнаралық ұстанымы өзге де ғылым салаларында бұл нәтижелердің құнды ақпаратқа толы екендігін дәлелдейді.

Түйін сөздер: электронды пресс-релиздер, корпустық лингвистика, позитивті сыпайылық стратегиясы.

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Вежливый голос британских компаний: корпусное исследование электронных пресс-релизов

Основная цель данной статьи проанализировать и оценить эффективность применения стратегии вежливости в британских электронных пресс-релизах. Анализ электронных пресс-релизов в сфере бизнеса всегда привлекателен для лингвистов, поскольку в этом жанре текста

наблюдаема. Данные для исследования были собраны с официального сайта очень известной и старой британской компании Unilever и проанализированы с помощью автомотизированных программ анализа данных, что придает исследованию новизну и актуальность. Применение компьютерных программ привело к получению точных результатов. Это исследование направлено на применение теорий стратегии вежливости Брауна и Левинсона для отслеживания определенной прагматики в электронных пресс-релизах. Результаты показывают, что электронные пресс-релизы широко используют стратегии позитивной вежливости, потому что электронные пресс-релизы создаются с учетом культурных особенностей целевой аудитории. Врезультате исследования можно твердо утвердить что этот инструмент эффективно работает для создания положительного имиджа компании. Таким образом, данное исследование привлекателен своим междисциплинарным подходом и результаты этой научной работы могут применятся не только в прагмалингвистике, но и в сфере маркетинга и бизнеса в целом.

Ключевые слова: электронные пресс-релизы, корпусная лингвистика, стратегия позитивной вежливости.

Introduction

Brown and Levinson suggested positive politeness theory in 1987. Their research discussed not only positive politeness, but also negative politeness, off-record and on bald and so on. However, positive politeness theory is likely to be more popular among linguists and sociolinguists because of its extensive strategies or typology. Secondly, it is only possible to evaluate positive politeness strategy effectiveness in communication and social interaction. Initially Brown and Levinson employed this method in conversations of different cultures, however it evoked criticism in Eastern cultures, where being polite is accepted in different aspect. Hence, the chosen corpus for this current research is extracted from British culture, British companies' e-press releases, where Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategy is applicable as it was mentioned by several researchers (Biber et al. 1999: 1098), (O'Driscoll, 2007:465), (Culpeper, 2011:391), (Haugh M., Obana Y. 2011:148), (Leech, 2014:81).

Despite the critiques, linguists applied this theory from several ankles of research. There are works which analyze press releases too. We will discuss them in the appropriate section. The novelty of this research is e-press releases are written differently in different times because of social demands and technological advancements, therefore results of the research is different from the previous works. Additionally, it is the tool to analyze pragmatics of the speaker (writer/ author), which adds relevance to this research.

'Politeness is only recognized – when some aspect of the addresser's behavior provides evidence for the addressee that the addresser holds addressee in higher or lower position…' (Wang, 2014: 275). According to Wang's research work politeness is traced in spoken language or oral conversations rather than written texts, therefore it will be noteworthy to look at this occurrence from the written and electronic text's perspective.

Positive politeness strategy itself is a pragmatic term. So, this research is looking for the pragmatics of public relations texts. Brown and Levinson define 'face' as 'the public self-image' and press releases are the tools to build company's public image, which is expected to be positive (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61). From this perspective this theory is more than applicable in our research.

We will look at *only* positive politeness strategies applied in e-press releases. The subject of the research is chosen as e-press releases. The objectives of the research are to answer research questions, which were indicated in the next section after analyzing previous research works on this issue.

The research is based on the definitions of terms used by Brown and Levinson:

Face – The public image of an individual or organisation; the way in which s/he or it wishes to be perceived by others(Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61).

Positive Face – The desire to be perceived by others in a positive manner: to find approval for ones actions, abilities and/or values(Brown and Levinson, 1987: 62).

Face-threatening Act (FTA) – A communicative act that threatens the face of either speaker or addressee, either by indicating that their opinions/values/abilities are less appreciated (threatening positive face) or imposing upon the freedom of action of the individual/organisation (threatening negative face) (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 65).

Positive Politeness – Politeness that is used to soften the effects of FTAs threatening positive face, either by including the addressee in the speaker's group, thus indicating that the addressee is valued equally, or highlighting positive aspects in addition to the FTA (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 70).

S – speaker

H – hearer

Materials and methods

The corpus of e-press releases was collected from the official website of the authoritative British company Unilever. This company specializes in the following divisions: field of beauty and personal care, food and refreshment and home care. This company functions not only in the territory of Britain but worldwide (famous brands of the company: Lipton, Persil, Cif etc.), hence research material was collected strictly from British offices' publications. E-press releases are free to copy and download from the website, as they are expected to be copied by journalists and it is possible to every stakeholder to read the originally published material. All press releases are retrieved from 2020 till 2022. Overall, there were collected 100 press releases, which were chosen purposefully with business content. The texts of e-press releases have almost the same number of words and the same layout, which was fixed worldwide. Most of the texts contain quotations and one small picture, which was also agreed worldwide structure of e-press releases.

With the help of sentiment analysis application Lingmotif it was possible to measure positive or negative opinion reflected in the e-press releases. According to Moreno-Ortiz and others work, such automated applications make it possible to measure expressed opinions reflected in the texts (Moreno-Ortiz, Salles-Bernal, & Orrequia-Barea, 2019: 535).

The next platform was Atlas.ti, which helped to code each strategy in e-press releases to get quantitative insights from the corpus. To demonstrate how this platform transforms plain texts into numbers there were chosen only 10 texts from the corpus.

Accordingly, there were combined automated application calculation and were collected manually examples of positive politeness strategies. As there are more than 12 positive politeness strategies suggested by Brown and Levinson, it was challenging to look at each e-press release individually to find if positive politeness strategies were employed in the texts. Therefore, we have chosen following 5 positive politeness strategies, as these strategies are more suitable to look at written texts, other strategies need turn taking conditions, which is not possible in such type of texts. Chosen strategies are illustrated in the table 1. All explanations are based on original definitions of Brown and Levinson from 1987.

Table 1 – Positive politeness strategies and their definition

#	Strategy	Explanation
1	*Exaggerate*	In written texts this strategy is often done with intensifying modifiers to show *interest, approval, sympathy with H(reader)*
2	*Offer, promise*	This is typical strategy to satisfy H's wants S does everything positive, sometimes they can be false, however it is done to show S's positive intention.
3	*Be optimistic*	Cooperative strategy, it is for S to assume that H wants S's wants for S (or for S and H) and will help him to obtain them. That is, for S to be so presumptuous as to assume H will cooperate with him may carry a tacit commitment for S to cooperate with H as well, or at least a tacit claim that H will cooperate with S because it will be in their mutual shared interest.
4	*Include both S and H in the activity*	Cooperative strategy
5	*Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)*	S may satisfy H's positive-face want (that S want H's wants, to some degree) by actually satisfying some of H's wants. Human-relations wants – the wants to be liked, admired, cared about, understood, listened to, and so on

Literature review

Positive politeness strategy of Brown and Levinson is applied in many linguistic and pragmatic research. However, there are lots of criticism among this theory such as grounding 'face' in individual western culture, which is totally ethnocentric (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 2006: 24). Following this, Bargiella-Chiapinni claims that the concept of 'face' in Brown and Levinson's theory is slightly changed from the initial understanding of 'face' suggested by Goffman (Bargiela-Chiappini,2003: 1453). Goffman explains 'face' from the North American perspective, and in his understanding 'face' is about self-image rather than something global, while Brown and Levinson define 'face' as 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself' (Brown and Levinson, 1987:

62). According to Terkourafi, Brown and Levinson have created 'the impression that face is an a priori attribute of individuals that stands to be threatened in interaction, and must thus above all be safeguarded' (Terkourafi, 2007: 320).

Despite the fact that Brown and Levinson' s theory massively criticized and the notion 'face' is more figurative word, it is still popular in academic research. Popularity of Brown and Levinson's theory expanded narrow notion of 'face' to the concept, from figurative word to the research object, from individual to national concern.

So 'to keep that face' there was applied positive politeness strategies. As it was mentioned before, there were massive research on analyzing adequacy of this theory. For example, Watts complains that Brown and Levinson's theory focused only on the speaker, that they speak about hearer or addressee just to check validness of the chosen strategy (Watts, 2003:51). From this perspective, it is better to apply such position in a written text, as addressee in written texts are not determined individually. Now we will look at application of positive politeness theory to written texts. Myers was the first researcher who applied this theory in written texts by investigating the presence of politeness in scientific articles. She claims that there are some limitations in employing this theory in written texts, firstly, the absence of hearer/ reader at the moment of producing the text. From this derives the second issue, the speaker/ writer is unlikely to get immediate reaction of hearer/ reader. The next issue is the written text can be addressed to unknown audience, so it might be challenging to choose appropriate strategy (Myers, 1989: 2). However, we might argue that in public relations it is always clear to whom press releases are addressed. There is always market research, which comes before creating marketing tool. As texts are closely connected with business content in our corpus these limitations were excluded. If we look at FTA in business correspondence, this was subject of most linguistic research, where positive politeness strategies were applied. F.Jansen and D.Janssen conducted two experiments, in one of them, they asked participants to evaluate effectiveness of politeness strategies in business letters and found out that not all strategies are effective (F.Jansen, D.Janssen, 2010: 2544). In Kazakhstani researchers' case, Aimoldina A. compared Kazakh, Russian and English business correspondence, and mentions exclusive use of positive politeness strategies in business correspondence (Aimoldina, 2019: 69). This review shows that positive politeness strategy theory of Brown and Levinson attracts attention in different scope of business.

After analyzing these research works, we were convinced that there are still research gaps to fill in. Firstly, lack of research, which analyze application of positive politeness strategies in written electronic texts. Then most research works are done without applying any automated data mining programs. It might help to get more accurate results. Therefore, in our research we will answer following research questions:

How positive politeness strategies are implemented in e-press releases?

What is the frequency of positive politeness strategies in e-press releases?
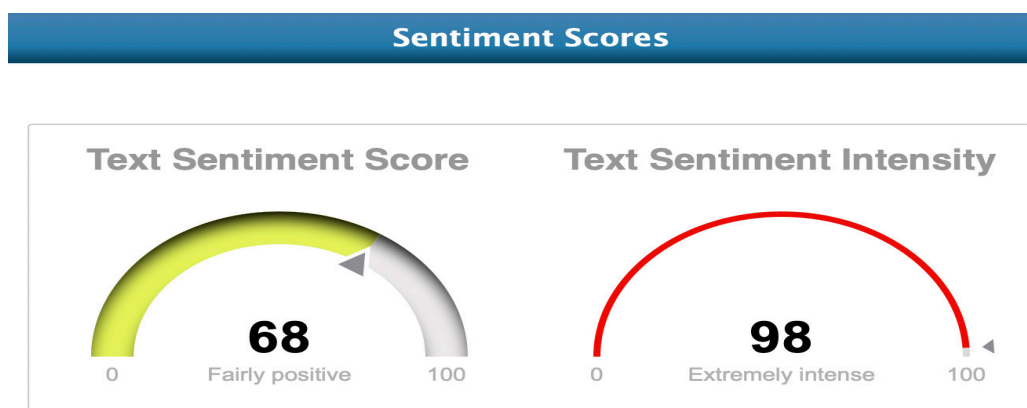
Which positive politeness strategies are mostly employed in e-press releases?

Results and discussion

In this section we will look at the results of linguistic data analysis. In picture 1 shows to what extend the texts are positive. This was possible due to the data analyzing program Lingmotif. There were two variables such as text sentiment score and text sentiment intensity. 68 percent out of 100 is fairly positive result, however intensity is 98 per cent, which is extremely intense result.

In the picture 2 presented sentiment data of the e-press releases. Positive items are indicated as 156, whereas neutral items exceed till 183. This indicates that despite the extremely intensiveness e-press releases are written objectively. However positive sentences exceed in number negative and neutral sentences, which is explained by the e-press releases main intention to persuade target audience and build positive relationships among stakeholders.

In the picture 3 there are illustrated coded positive politeness strategies in numbers, which are fixed in e-press releases. There are more examples than mentioned in this section, most of examples have the same feature, so they are not involved in this discussion. As the main aim of business is to build trust between customers and the company, the texts contain massive use of exaggeration. The graph shows results of analysis of only10 e-press releases with dominating variables such as exaggeration and promises.

Sentiment Scores

Text Sentiment Score

68

0   Fairly positive   100

Text Sentiment Intensity

98

0   Extremely intense   100

Picture 1 – Sentiment score of e-press releases

Sentiment Data

Lexical Items	Positive Items	Negative Items	Neutral Items
1970	156	73	183
Sentences	Positive Sentences	Negative Sentences	Neutral Sentences
168	89	27	52

Picture 2 – Sentiment data of e-press releases

Exaggeration (32)

In the following examples there are 3 exaggerations in one sentence, which shows clear intention of the writer to be intentionally polite. This is because main aim of press releases is to attract most attention of journalists and potential consumers. Mostly while launching a new product companies try to declare loudly about new product and its benefits. Therefore 32 times occurrence of the variable "exaggeration" in 10 texts is totally justified. Examples of exaggeration:

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the impact of products on the planet…

Creating recyclable, paper-based packaging without additional plastic layers is a huge challenge. Pulpex's patented pulp packaging provides a promising solution to radically reduce the use of plastic and will help Unilever achieve its commitments to a waste-free world.

With Unilever we can build on our work and vision spanning 26 years of creating brilliant products…

… the world's biggest cleaning and laundry brands…

These significant commitments from Unilever, combined with strong sustainable sourcing, have real potential to make an important contribution

Mostly superlative adjectives, adverbs, strong adjectives and modifiers are used to exaggerate the sentence meaning. In the last example there are 4 exaggerations in a sentence, which shows high expectations of the company to set positive image of the company. If to omit these adjectives from the sentence, it still does not loose its initial meaning.

Promises (26)

The next dominant variable is promises. Mostly company promises to make useful, healthy and eco-friendly products. Again, by promising something positive company sets positive image on target audience. Examples:

… will work with Unilever's industry-leading sustainable sourcing programmes to prevent unintended pressures on land use.

This example with promise that they *will prevent pressure on land use* is just words, rather than results of any action. The sentence itself is structured in future time, which is typical in the sentences with promising intention. This sentence is extracted from speech in quotation mark. The author of this speech is somehow business partner of Unilever, so author uses positive politeness strategy to build good business relationship with Unilever by speaking loudly about potential of the company.

…on-renewable fossil sources of carbon (identified in the Carbon Rainbow as black carbon) will be replaced using captured CO2.

We're going to be stronger and bolder than ever and that's what I hope all my 200 women guests will get out of this FREE event

Giving gifts to H (14)

According to Brown and Levinson giving gifts to H, from the one hand means literally giving gifts, on the other hand it might be showing sympathy, understanding the needs of the hearer/ reader or cooperating with them. For example, in the next extract from e-press releases we see that company tries to show that they understand children's needs to get inspiration and support, their need to be creative:

All the products in the Love Writing Co range are designed to inspire, encourage confidence, creativity and make a difference to children…

…safeguard supply, respond to new patterns of consumer demand, preserve cash and support…

14 times authors use this strategy to show that their company always cares about consumers. Any company who wants to produce right product to their clients, first analyze costumers' needs then they explicitly show in the e-press releases that they are aware of costumer needs. This is justified strategy to achieve positive image of the company.

Another typical example is during the pandemic there were lots of demand on health caring products such as soaps, sanitizers, so Unilever even in 2020 continues to use following phrases:

"… people are suffered from the covid ….and we will protect…"

Being optimistic (9)

In e-press releases with business content, it is always about fulfilling customer's expectations and wants. Therefore, being optimistic in any case is key principle of Unilever's PR department. In the following example employed several positive politeness strategies such as being optimistic, including both S and H in the activity and exaggeration.

If we all understand the importance of oral health and embrace simple, proven preventative strategies, we can help decrease risk for oral diseases and empower people worldwide to join in the fight against oral diseases that impact overall health and well being …

We're going to be stronger and bolder than ever and that's what I hope all my 200 women guests will get out of this FREE event

Include both S and H in the activity (8)

This cooperative strategy works better when company needs to shorten the distance between S and H, in our case S is Unilever and H is potential customer. "We all scared … it is our common issue",

these phrases call for cooperative action. Pandemic is taken as common phenomena, which made people to care about each other, which made people to be close to families. This occasion was suitable used in e-press release too.

When the pandemic kicked in… it was scary, we had no idea what the impact on the housing market would be….

It is a great opportunity and has brought us exposure at a national level and is led by a recognized business icon.

From the start of the Covid-19 crisis, we have been guided by clear priorities in line with our multi-stakeholder business model to protect our people .....our communities.

We're going to be stronger and bolder than ever and that's what I hope all my 200 women guests will get out of this FREE event

In all examples we traced overuse of pronouns – *we, our, us,* which is also pragmatic strategy to group people into one-whole system, to vanish distance despite social and other conditions of parts (Unilever and potential costumers).

If to analyze the content of e-press releases where this strategy employed, mostly company talks about their products and tries to indicate that the company and customer have common values and global mission concerning saving the Earth, recovering from Covid-19 and other global issues.
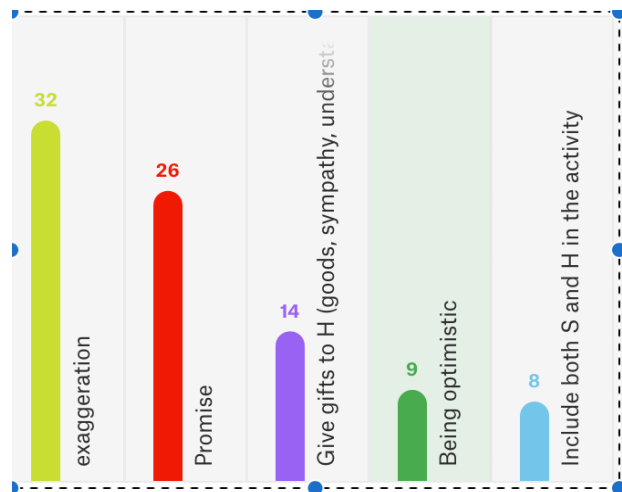
Picture 3 – Frequency of positive politeness strategies in e-press releases

All in all, these chosen strategies are used in one sentence or in one e-press release simultaneously, which shows great interest of the company in building positive relations and sustainable business.

Conclusion

Analysis of e-press releases of British companies proved that positive politeness strategies are mostly used to shorten the distance between S and H, and to show that S and H are cooperators. Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategies are applicable to British culture, this explains massive use of *exaggeration* or *promises*. This massive use of positive politeness strategies proves that they were employed intentionally and explicitly, considering cultural difference of the target audience, that is the British audience. Except cultural features, Unsilvers' e-press releases considered social issues of the current time such as global pollution, saving the Earth, covid-19 and other attractive themes.

In conclusion, e-press releases, which were collected from Unilever's websites are adapted to British culture and society, and openly uses positive politeness strategies to communicate company's values and vision, which leads to positive image set of the company. These research results were achieved with the help of computer assisted analyses. Another novelty of this research was the investigation of electronic written text by applying Brawn and Levinson's theory. In the future, the interest of application of Brown and Levinson's theory to written texts is expected to be increased.

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