This Customer is Complicated and Tedious!!!: Investigating Maxim Flouting and its Functions in Business E-mail Correspondence

PHANRUJA LIMTHAWORN & SONTHIDA KEYURAVONG
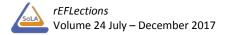*King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi*

Email correspondence is a significant part of business transactions in the age of digital technology. Writers of business emails should therefore conform to the widely accepted etiquettes such as clarity, conciseness, politeness and relevance (Gimenez-Moreno, 2011). This can contribute to the success of business partnership in the long run. Interestingly, in the real world communication, all the etiquettes are not always observed because of different circumstances. Based on the framework of Grice's Cooperative Principle and maxims (1975), the purpose of this research was to examine the functions of maxim flouting done by the relevant parties while discussing their business transactions. The data came from email correspondence among the three business partners: a Thai export company, a European sales representative and two European clients. The findings suggested that the correspondents flouted the four maxims to serve specific purposes: to prompt actions, to show sincerity, to show strong intimacy, and to exercise solidarity. I therefore concluded that breaking the maxims did not necessarily jeopardise business partnership. In contrast, it could even be beneficial to the parties involved.

Keywords: *business email correspondence, Grice's cooperative principle and maxims, flouting, functions*

INTRODUCTION

The innovation in digital technology has facilitated our communication nowadays. It creates not only new communicative devices but also new forms which allow people to connect without time constraint, geographic barriers or budget limitation, as long as internet network is accessible. Along with electronic technology advancement, digital devices such as computers, laptops and smartphones are constantly developed to keep up with the pace. With these computer aided media, people can share, exchange and respond to the information through different modes of communication. Undeniably, those tools of electronic communication have become very common in people's personal and professional life.

Despite a wide range of available communication channels, Derks and Bakker (2010) claim that email is still the most prevalent form of computer-mediated

communication (CMC) within and between organisations. In the same way, Jensen (2009) reports that about 90% of all communication in a multination organization was conducted via email. Based on the figures investigated by Radicati Group Inc., a technology market research firm (www.radicati.com), the use of email worldwide continues to grow at a healthy pace in both business and consumer emails. One of the possible explanations for email prominence is that it is mainly asynchronous which does not require an immediate attention or responses. The recipients are therefore able to manage and respond whenever they are ready to (Griffin 2012). McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) posit that the asynchronous quality has apparently attributed to the prominent use of email in the international business setting in which time differences are one of the key factors. In addition, communication via email can be conducted on multiple sites, a critical factor contributing to the success in business (Vile & Collins, 2004). Finally, email writing allows writers to go over their text before sending and some undesirable messages can be removed in time. This can help maintain business relationship between organisations.

Since email is markedly used to facilitate business dealings and negotiations, certain etiquettes must be observed to ensure successful communication. That is, as Giménez-Moreno (2011) proposes, the message should be concise and straight to the point to give the recipient only necessary information. Also, it should be appropriately written and in a professional manner. The main features of email as a professional register should therefore be informative, use formal language, use modality, mitigation and hedging when necessary.

In this research, however, the email correspondence of a Thai company and its partners was selected for my analysis because interestingly, some of the emails did not strictly adhere to the etiquettes. And as mentioned earlier, since email is mainly asynchronous, the final message is intended by the author. Not conforming to the etiquettes, therefore, must be intentionally performed to serve specific purposes. Applying Grice's Cooperative Principle and maxims, commonly regarded as basic requirements for the success in communication, I intended to answer the following research question:

What are the functions of maxim flouting in business correspondence?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Email in professional settings

A number of scholars have written about the benefits and popularity of email as a mode of communication in professional settings (Hornung, 2005; Peterson, Hohensee & Xia, 2011; Skovholt & Svenning, 2006; Waldvogel, 2007; Whitty & Carr, 2006 among others). They pinpointed several features of email contributing to its popularity such as speedy interaction, convenience in terms

of delivery versus recipients and its ability to prompt extensive collaboration among work colleagues.

Several past studies on email communication in workplace settings were also conducted. To name a few examples, Peterson, Hohensee & Xia (2011) studied the Enron email corpus to test how business formality was affected by external factors such as social distance and weight of imposition. Employing Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) in their analysis, they concluded that the corpus contained different external factors that affected the sender's choice of formality. Furthermore, Skovholt and Svenning (2006) looked at how email copies were utilised to encourage interaction and build network and relationship among business organisations. Their arguments were very interesting in that it highlighted both the bright side and the dark side of email correspondence between business organisations. On the positive side, it could be used to facilitate multi-party interaction, build up a common information pool, create a personal identity and strengthen alliances. Nevertheless, it could also be used to manipulate the recipient's social conduct when copies were sent to the third party.   Waldvogel's study (2007) was conducted on greetings and closings in workplace email. The findings suggested that socially distant greetings and closings tended to create a negative relationship between staff and management team. Friendlier greetings and closings, on the contrary, constructed an open, positive relationship.

According to the literature, it can be seen that none of the previous work has touched upon business email and maxim flouting. Hence, this study should be able to offer a new approach to the study of business email to the academia and those interested in this area of study.

Grice's Cooperative Principle and Maxims

In order to achieve an effective conversation, the participants recognise and share the cooperative efforts at certain extent, as well as the purpose or direction of the talk which might be fixed from the start or evolve during the exchange. As Grice (1975) posits, "[m]ake our conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (p.45).

In the "Logic and Conversation" the philosopher, H.P. Grice (1975) introduced the concept of Cooperative Principle (henceforth CP) which was distinguished into four categories of conversational maxims concerning truthfulness, informativeness, relevance and clarity as described in Table 1.

Table 1
Grice's four maxims

Maxims	Explanations	Examples
Quantity	- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange) - Do not make your contribution more informative than is required	A: How is the new massage house nearby our office? B: Very nice and clean! They have both body and foot massage.
Quality	- Do not say what you believe to be false - Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence	A: Where is the Eiffel tower? B: Paris
Relation	- Be relevant	A: What you had for breakfast? B: Chicken fried rice and coffee.
Manner	- Avoid obscurity of expression - Avoid ambiguity - Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity) - Be orderly	A: How to get such a soft beef steak? B: You marinade it and leave in a refrigerator for 8 hours.

Grice viewed the concept of CP and maxims as a rational cooperative behaviour, assuming that the participants cooperate in the CP process will achieve a successful communication. However, they may fail to fulfill a maxim in several ways which includes:

Table 2
Failure to fulfill a maxim

Ways	Explanations
Violate	The speaker quietly and secretly violates a maxim so the information is likely to be misled.
Opt out	The speaker is opting out from CP operation and is unwilling to abide by the CP/maxim.
Clash	The speaker may be unable to fulfill the first maxim without violating the second.
Flout	The speaker is assumably able to fulfill the CP/maxim but blatantly and intentionally fail to do so, without violating (because of a clash) or opting out.

Grice further mentioned the implicatures arising from flouting maxims as the hearer must infer from what the speaker said for what it is really meant. By flouting maxim of quality, the metaphor or irony might occur, for instance. According to Neale (1992), Grice emphasised the possibility of a divergence between what you say and what you mean, which accounts for the conversational implicatures. In the conversation, what is meant is often goes beyond what is said and this underlying meaning can be inferred or predictable.

Many of Grice's papers are more concerned with the distinction between saying and meaning that is how the speakers know how to generate these implicit meanings and how they can assume their addressees will understand their intended meaning. He proposed that there is an accepted way of speaking which we all accept as standard behaviour. When we produce or hear an utterance, we assume the statement is generally true, relevant, expressed in understandable terms and with adequate information. If the utterance does not conform to this model (meaning a maxim is flouted), then we assume that the appropriate meaning is there to be inferred (so an implicature occurred). This is the standard basic explication of the CP, maxims and implicatures (Davies, 2000).

Kallia (2004) in her study of politeness focusing on Gricean implicatures, suggested that power of politeness, or a power of a symbolic medium used and shaped by the individual speakers, represents social standards of 'just and right' behaviour or conduct. Politeness thus mediates between the individual and the social, motivating and structuring courses of action as well as being instrumental in performing them. Politeness is not only used as a strategy to achieve smooth interaction, but also to convey indirect messages to the addressee that is the implicatures of politeness which can influence social relationship between the participants such as increasing the degree of intimacy between them (Werkhofer 1992:196, as cited in Kallia 2004).

Eskritt, Whalen and Lee (2008) have used three types of Gricean maxims e.g. quality, relation and quantity in the game conditions for the three to five year old preschoolers, to examine their awareness of the designated Grice's maxims. The results show that children demonstrated an awareness of the three maxims for example, two-thirds of the children were sensitive to the game condition applying the maxim of relation, but did not in quality and quantity conditions. As described by Sperber and Wilson (1986), that the concept of relevance is so fundamental to communication that it does not require learning. This enhances the idea in communication that one assumes that the speaker has an intended meaning that is relevant. However, the result of this research cannot claim that an awareness of relation maxim is necessary for the development of the other maxims or it needs to be learned as more examination in depth is required.

In this study, Grice's CP and Maxims was selected for the analysis because, first of all, the theory has been well accepted by scholars in the field of linguistics and communication. Despite later contesting theories, Grice's proposal could still be regarded as their departure point and that simultaneously confirms its prominence and significance. In addition, since the data are the written business emails showing the interaction between Writer 1 and 2, it could be perceived as

a dialogue. The application of Grice's theory is therefore appropriate in this sense.

METHODOLOGY

Setting

The study was conducted in the sales and marketing department of a medium size company in Thailand, manufacturing luxurious products for worldwide export. Its clients are mainly from North America and Europe so the communication is either direct with the customers or through their subsidiary offices or a sales representative, appointed to serve the clientele in the territory, by using email in English. Since the company in Thailand is a production base, the salespersons who communicate with their direct customers or their subsidiary companies or sales representatives, use English email correspondence on a daily basis.

Data selection

The data used in this study were selected from email correspondence between (a) a Thai sales executive officer and her European client from France and (b) one sales representative from Spain and another Thai sales executive officer. So, there were two pairs of participants involved in the correspondence. Two sets of emails were chosen from different topics that the participants routinely discussed with their peer correspondents from January to June 2016.   The criteria for the data selection were as follows:
1. The email must contain at least 75 words because the emails that were too short would not yield much use for the textual analysis.
2. The topics discussed in the business emails must be of great significance. To explain further, they could affect or disrupt the business as a whole were the communication unsuccessful.

The first pair of emails between the French client and the Thai sales executive was therefore chosen for the analysis because of the nature of their arguments. The client was making a complaint and the Thai staff was trying to ease the heated situation. In the second pair of emails, the Spanish sales representative and another Thai staff were discussing the issuance of invoice for a difficult customer.

Data analysis

In this study, I applied the Grice's maxims to investigate types of maxim flouts discovered in business email. The reason why I believed flouting (instead of simply violating the maxims) took place was because the writing production allowed writers to contemplate and edit their messages before sending them to

recipients. Any messages sent to the recipients should therefore derive from their own intention. The following steps of analysis were observed:

1. Since my focus was on the flouting, not adhering to, the four maxims, from the selected data, I set criteria to identify maxim flouting as follows.

Table 3
Criteria for maxim flouting identification

Flouting	Descriptions
Quantity	Mentioning the same thing repeatedly
Quality	Providing untruthful statements, exaggerating the facts
Relation	Giving irrelevant details
Manner	Not being clear, using satire

2. After the flouting had been identified, its functions was interpreted to respond to the research question.
3. The analysis of the results was provided in the section of Conclusion and discussion.

Interpreting data

For the sake of clarification, an example email was provided in this section to demonstrate why the data to be analysed should be those containing flouting, not adhering.

Table 4
Example email

De:* "T"
Enviado el: lunes, 14 de marzo de 2016 12:47
Para: "A" (Sales Representative)
Asunto: RE: Customer S / Statement

Dear A,

Sorry for delay response.

 *1.- New transfer *

Received transferred amount $15,000 on Mar 8 with many thanks. Kindly find attached the remittance advice for your reference.

Will send updated statement to you *soon*.

2.- Samples invoice
Credit note will be issued once customer return samples to our side, please kindly note.

Best regards,

T

According to the above correspondence, T adhered to all the maxims as seen from ways in which her statements were composed and put in order. T mentioned the receipt of the sum of $15,000 transferred with the exact date and the subsequent action she took (sending the remittance to A for his reference). She ended the first point with a promise of the next action that she would take. In this short, concise chunk of text, T adhered to the maxim of quantity in that she was not providing A with too much information of what had happened or what would be happening. In addition, she adhered to the maxim of quality when she specified the amount of money and the date of receipt which could be proven truthful by evidence such as a bank statement. The maxim of relation were also observed since T strictly maintained her email message within the scope of her work which her reader could make sense of. And since the maxim of manner revolves around being brief, clear and sequential, T's sequence of her message could be said to have followed the maxim.

Given the fact that T adhered to all the maxims throughout her writing, she still flouted the maxim of manner when she wrote that "[she would] send updated statement to [A] *soon.* The temporal adverb "soon" gave a general, vague idea of the future. The flouting in this case could be interpreted as a sign of T's uncertainty of time in which her promise would be fulfilled.

FINDINGS

The analysis showed that flouting occurred in all the emails. I argued that each flouting incident had been intended by the authors in order to serve a specific purpose. Given the limited number of words of the research, the most obvious flouting and its function in each email would be explicated in detail.

1. Prompting actions

Table 5
French client (C)'s email

From: C *Sent:* Tuesday, June 21, 2016 7:50 PM *To:* P (Company's Employee 2) *Subject:* RE: Pilot run rings / order 16001000 and 16002000 Dear N, Thank you for your e-mail. I have to say that our team and I are very surprised.

Indeed, you decided by your own to reproduce all the molds without asking us if we were ok, and even if 5 out of 6 of them were validated (except size 59). I can understand the reasons why your development team took this decision, **but as this is a very important development issue, I had to validate this process**. à *I really need more communication between us.*

*So please, note that for each aesthetic decision, including the creation of new molds during development part, **I have to give my approval**. **We need to work together as a team and we have to discuss the big decisions.***

For example, I just do not understand why you get rid of the older molds that we have validated (thanks to the very last pilot run) without asking us if a total new molds development was ok for us.

For me, the decision your development team takes are unilateral and it is difficult for me to work like that.

Commercially speaking, this situation is a real issue for us since we lost 2,5 months of potential sales : we still do not have all the pilot run delivered. That is why we ask you to send us *asap* 2 rings of each size made of the new molds and 1 ring of each size made with the former molds in order for us to compare and validated it. But we ask you to find a solution to deliver all the orders in due time. We will not be able to accept a new delay because you will be waiting for our approval concerning the new mold. Please, find a solution and confirm me that it will be ok.
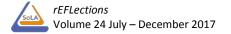
*I am sorry to say that if our development process is not fully transparent between us, and **if big decisions are not taken together, I will not be able to ask you for new quotation on future collection**. So please, try to : *

1)   *Ask for my approval concerning big issues like important development decisions*

2)   *Let me know regularly when you have any problem with a project*
3)   *Announced correct and realistic development and delivery times*

4)   *Send us the 2 pieces / size with new molds and 1 piece / size with old molds as soon as possible*

Best regards,

C

In the first email written by the French client (C) to the Thai sales executive (N), the maxim most obviously flouted by C was the maxim of quantity. As the situation was about N's company making a decision to adjust the product without seeking approval from C, the important issue arose as a consequence. C wrote the below email to launch a series of complaints against N's team. Repeating the same statements over and over again signaled C's flouting the maxim of quantity as this could be regarded as unnecessarily providing too much information to the reader. C wrote first that "*as this is a very important*

development issue, I had to validate this process" followed by pretty similar statements *"I have to give my approval. We need to work together as a team and we have to discuss the big decisions"*, *"For me, the decision your development team takes are unilateral and it is difficult for me to work like that"* and *"if big decisions are not taken together, I will not be able to ask you for new quotation on future collection."* After those statements were repeated, C ended his email with 5 actions that needed to be immediately taken by N. Therefore, C's flouting the maxim of quantity was done to urge N to fix the problem so that their business could continue to operate.

2. Showing sincerity

Table 6
Thai sales executive (N)'s email

De : N
Envoyé : mercredi 22 juin 2016 06:42
À : C
Objet : RE: Pilot run rings / order 16001000 and 16002000
Dear C
Thank you for your below message and **I apologize for the mess you had below**.
I do understand the process takes time and you do not get the result so far.   However, ***it is important lesson for our team* to realize that it is actually the big decision to be made and we should get the consent from you first** before modify any master models **which are already approved**. As I called T yesterday about this issue, she commented already to the team that we should correct only T59.   However, the product team found that on master model T55 that you mentioned we should stick on it, the lines seem to be deeper than the rest so it might be the reason why you can get good result on this size specially.   They then decided to follow the master model of T55, and correct every sizes with their good intention that the rings will all have the same look as T55.
At the moment, we have to keep our fingers crossed that the samples that we will get from the new master models will be the same as T55. Now to your below directions, we confirm:
1) we confirm in the future, we will not **modify anything if the model is already approved**.
2) we confirm to keep you update regularly on the problems if we might have.
3) from now on for the new projects we receive from you, we will give you approx. development time and sample delivery.   We will also keep you updated from time to time about the progress so you can foresee if the timing we promise can be realized.
4) we will send you 2 pcs /size of the new models, and 1 pc/size from the old models, the *first week of July (4-6/7)**.   * We also confirm to send the *10 prs Grey* *cufflinks* in the same shipment.* Pls confirm the shipment to be sent to the same address/attention we usually do** (just ask in case you have speedy channel to be used for sample shipment).

*5) delivery of this ring GM code royale, order no. 16001679 will be shipped the first lot on 16/7 and the rest by 28/7.   For 16001891, the ring GM code royale will be shipped in August but depending on the approval on new master models.
We apologize for all the troubles caused to you. **We learned a lot from this lesson, and will certainly not let it happen again in the future.**

Best regards

N

In a response to C's email, N also flouted the maxim of quantity but for her own reason. As C's email was accusing her team of not being transparent in their decision making and not respecting C's approval, N's reaction was to over-apologise to her client. She repeated her apologies twice, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the email, and overemphasized the idea that her team and she had learnt a valuable lesson from this mistake. Also, to correct C's misunderstanding, N mentioned seeking and respecting C's approval twice as a way to show that N's team recognised C's authority. This flouting demonstrated a classic business relationship between service provider and client. To satisfy her client, N was obliged to show her sincerity by repeating the same messages again and again.

3. Showing strong intimacy

Table 7
Thai sales executive (T)'s email

De: "T"
Enviado el: viernes, 25 de marzo de 2016 9:36
 Para: "A"
 Asunto: RE: Customer S / Statement

Dear "A",

I am checking all invoices issued in 2015, will send update below details next Monday.
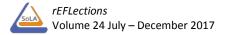
- Update statement including credit amount to be issue à for your checking first then we will pass to Accounting dept.
- Update sample invoices for both of us follow up

Hope we could clear outstanding amount before our retire.

Best regards,
T

According to this email, T wrote to a Spanish sales representative with whom she developed a close friendship for over 3 years. To show such strong intimacy, she flouted the maxim of quality by stating her wish to get the job done before

her retirement. This was stated as a joke between friends. Therefore, even though it was exaggerated, it did not really bother her reader because it was meant to express the strong level of affection between them.

4. Expressing solidarity

Table 8
Spanish sales representative (A)'s email

From: A
To: T (Company's Employee 3)
Date: Fri, 25 Mar 2016 09:12:33 +0000
Subject: RE: Customer S / Statement
Thank you, "T" !
I know the statement of this customer is complicated and….tedious!!!
On the other hand, he is a good customer, so, I think it is worth the hassle.
I think the clearest way to make the statement, and follow it up, for all of us (you, Acc. Dpt., customer and me), is to show in the statement all the invoices issued during 2015, including those with samples, and show also the credit notes for each invoice. What do you think?
We could add a note in the invoices that include samples, for our easier control.
Ummmmmm....not sure if we could finalize before retiring….I'm almost!!!
[image:http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-Ec9qn4XhhiU/U5xIL4OSwCI/AAAAAAAAJKM/qA_y4YQTC0Q/s1600/summer-vacation-emoticon.png]
Again, thanks for your help!!! Enjoy week-end!!!
"A"

To respond to T's email, A flouted the maxims of quality and relation to back T's earlier joke about retirement. Hence, when he gave his similar response about retiring, it could be regarded as a way to express his solidarity with her. That is, they were both on the same team and they were both experiencing the same problem at work. Furthermore, A flouted the maxim of relation when he accused a client of being "complicated and tedious". This was irrelevant to T's earlier email but he did probably bring it up in order to make her laugh.
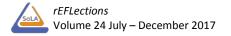
CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest a lot of interesting points. Generally speaking, with reference to Grice's four maxims, all the parties involved in the correspondence largely adhered to all the maxims. Possible explanations can be made by thinking of the nature of business communication in which financial gain is the ultimate purpose. To carry out a business transaction, communication must be successful. Writing a direct, relevant and concise email is therefore a significant practice. The evidence is clear in the example where the correspondent in question produced statements that displayed the quality of cooperative principles: clarity, evidence-backed statements, relevance and right amount of information.

Interestingly, despite the apparent conformity, flouting the maxims also emerged in the correspondence. According to the findings, C flouted the maxim of quantity when he/she required that the company's actions be immediately taken. N, on the other hand, responded by flouting the maxim of quantity when she repeatedly apologised to the client. As for the correspondence between T and A, maxim flouting could be identified. The former broke the maxim of quality by giving an exaggerated statement whereas the latter responded by giving the same kind of statement and irrelevantly commenting on the customer in question. In so doing, A flouted both quantity and relation maxims.

Their maxim violation and flouting should not, however, be seen as an obstacle to the success of their communication. Instead, it is what enhanced the professional relationship between the company and the clients as well as the company and the sales representative. When C made an overemphasis on the actions that needed to be taken, he/she wanted to make sure that the business would run as planned. N apologised repeatedly to show her responsibility and sincere commitment to the client. Her promise also pinpointed the fact that the organisation would take a serious action to solve the problems. Furthermore, A and T flouted the aforementioned maxims because they had already had an intimately professional relationship for at least 3 years. The flouting of maxims were therefore conducted purposefully for the sake of friendship and solidarity.

In conclusion, business email correspondence is a type of written communication that could facilitate the success of business transactions. Adhering to the cooperative principle and four maxims is certainly a great way to start. However, it is worth bearing in mind that violating or flouting the maxims is not necessarily jeopardy for business partnerships.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESARCH

This study has a major limitation in terms of the cultural differences among the correspondents which could be significant factors for the production of email text. Therefore, for future research, those interested in the business email correspondence could fill the above gap. In addition, they may use other theories such as politeness theory in the interpretation of data.

THE AUTHORS

Panruja Limthaworn is a graduate student in the English for Professional and International Communication (EPIC) at the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi.
phanruja.lim@gmail.com

Sonthida Keyuravong is a teacher trainer at the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. Her interests lie in the areas of curriculum and materials development, self-access learning, and computer-assisted language learning.
sonthida.key@kmutt.ac.th

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