1 Language of Meetings

General Language Points

We always say exactly what we mean:

a. in life.
b. in meetings.

Do you agree? Can you give some examples?

Discuss

Work in pairs or small groups. How have the speakers changed the way they express themselves so that their message is more effective?

This language may seem ridiculous when you read it, but in a diplomatic or business discussion this language is perfectly normal, and only takes a few seconds to say.

Can you give examples from your own language of how a basic message is presented in different language to make it more socially acceptable or effective?
Effective communication in meetings is partly a matter of knowing certain special expressions. Many of these are given in this book. Some of the ways we change the basic message are, however, generalisable. Look again at the example above: how many of these features did you notice?

1. Using *would, could* or *might* to make what you say more tentative.
2. Presenting your view as a question not a statement.
3. Using a grammatical negative (adding *n’t*) to make a suggestion more open and therefore more negotiable.
4. Using an introductory phrase to prepare the listener for your message.
5. Adding *I’m afraid* to make clear that you recognise the unhelpfulness of your response.
6. Using words which qualify or restrict what you say to make your position more flexible (*a bit* difficult, *a slight* problem).
7. Using *not* with a positive word instead of the obvious negative word (*not very convenient, I don’t agree*).
8. Using a comparative (*better, more convenient*) to soften your message.
9. Using a continuous form (*I was wondering*) instead of a simple form (*I wondered*) to make a suggestion more flexible.
10. Using stress as an important way of making the message more effective (*It is important . . .*)

All of these features are common in the language in this book. Before studying the specific language needed for effective communication in meetings, here is an opportunity to practise the most general features of English which occur again and again in the book.

1. Using *would*.

*Would* is often added to make any statement more tentative. It takes away the dogmatic tone of many statements.

That is unacceptable. That would be unacceptable.
That does not meet our requirements. That would not meet our requirements.
We need further reassurance. We would need further reassurance.

Put *would* in the following:

1. That is too late.
2. I prefer to meet before that.
3. We expect them to accept our proposals.
4. We hope to be able to complete before the end of the year.
5. Flying has definite advantages.
6. I’m not able to give a guarantee at this stage.
7. Finance is no problem.
8. I don’t agree.
9. I’m afraid I don’t accept that.
2. Questions

Often suggestions are presented in question form:
That is too late. ➔ Is that too late?
That would be too late. ➔ Would that be too late?

Change these suggestions into questions.
1. Flying would have advantages.
2. Friday would be convenient.
3. We would need another meeting fairly soon.
4. We could ask the UN to finance the project.
5. It would be a good idea to involve the French.
6. We could cancel.
7. We've got to increase our offer.
8. They can raise some of the finance themselves.

3. Adding n't to suggestions.

The examples above all sound more tentative and negotiable if they are grammatically negative:
Isn't that too late?
Wouldn't that be too late?

Change the other examples in the same way.

4. Introductory phrases.

Often we introduce our reaction with a word or phrase which tells the listener what kind of comment we are going to make. In particular some phrases warn the listener that disagreement follows. Here are the most common introductory phrases. Which ones are warnings?

Actually,
Well,
Frankly,

With respect,
To be honest,
As a matter of fact,

In those circumstances,
In fact,
To put it bluntly,

"Actually, George, the financial picture isn't too bright here at Head Office."
5. I'm afraid.

The most common phrase in spoken English to show that the speaker recognises that his/her reaction is in some way unhelpful or unwelcome is I'm afraid. It may warn of disagreement, but its general meaning is wider and indicates the speaker sees his/her reaction as unavoidably unhelpful:

Could I speak to Jack please?
I'm afraid he's out of the country at the moment.

Would next Tuesday be convenient?
I'm afraid I'm tied up all day.

Reply to these naturally but using I'm afraid.

1. Can we meet again later this week?
2. Couldn't we ask the IMF to fund us?
3. Wouldn't it be a good idea to involve the Americans?
4. Could you guarantee delivery by late September?
5. Do you know the Chairman personally?
6. Have you got last year's figures yet?
7. Where's the report?
8. I thought you were going to bring the details today?

6. Qualifiers.

Successful meetings often depend on avoiding direct disagreement. The more general the statement, the more likely it is to produce disagreement. Not surprisingly, therefore, good negotiators often restrict general statements by using qualifiers. Here are some of the most common qualifiers in English:

- a slight misunderstanding
- a short delay
- a little bit too early
- a bit of a problem
- some reservations
- a little more time

Add qualifiers to these:

1. That would leave me with a problem.
2. I have doubts about that.
3. We need more time.
4. We have production difficulties.
5. We have had a disagreement with our German colleagues.
6. We need changes before I can give the proposal my unqualified support.

Now say these things in an acceptable way using similar language:

7. I don't want to meet as early as that.
8. If you do that you'll leave me in a mess with my Personnel Manager.
9. I can't accept such a tight schedule.
10. How could you possibly think that's what I meant!
7. *Not* + *very* + positive adjective.

Often English avoids negative adjectives, preferring *not* + positive equivalent:

The hotel was dirty.  \rightarrow  The hotel wasn't very clean.
The food was cold.  \rightarrow  The food was not very hot.

Change these in a similar way:

1. That's inconvenient.
2. That's unsuitable.
3. That's a stupid suggestion.
4. This year's figures are bad.
5. That's a negative way of looking at the problem.
6. That proposal is insensitive to local conditions.
7. That suggestion is impractical.
8. That was an unhelpful remark.
9. That's a destructive approach.
10. That's a useless line of argument.
11. I'm unhappy with that idea.

This feature is not only true with an adjective construction. Notice these examples:

I disagree completely.
I dislike that idea.
I reject what you say.

I don’t agree at all.
I don’t like that idea at all.
I don’t accept what you say.

“There’s a bit of a discussion going on out there in the middle . . .”
8. Comparatives

In offering an alternative suggestion, the comparative is often used:

Wouldn’t the 31st be more convenient? It might be cheaper to go by air.

The implication is that the other person’s suggestion is acceptable, but yours is more acceptable. For this reason the use of the comparative is more tactful.

Offer these proposals, using a comparative, and an appropriate verb form including, for example, would, might, etc.

1. It’s appropriate to wait a a few weeks.
2. An earlier delivery date is helpful.
3. It’s a good idea to take a long term view.
4. It’s dangerous to delay a decision.
5. Mr. Carlos is a good person to approach.
6. The World Bank is anxious to support this kind of project.

Sometimes comparative phrases, not including adjectives, are used. You will need them in these examples:

7. NGOs provide funds for projects like this.
8. The Belgian plant has capacity in the short term.
9. Research is needed before we make a decision.

9. Continuous forms

In English, the simple past is used if the speaker sees the event as a single whole, while the past continuous is used if the speaker sees the event “stretched out” in time. For this reason the continuous form of the verb is more flexible, because the event can be “interrupted”, while the simple past is more often used to express facts or events seen as finished and complete.

Look at these pairs. Can you see any differences between them? Discuss them in small groups, and then compare your ideas with the whole group and with your teacher.

1. I tried to ring you yesterday.
   I was trying to ring you yesterday.

2. We intended to make new arrangements for next year.
   We were intending to make new arrangements for next year.

3. I wondered if you’d come to a decision yet.
   I was wondering if you’d come to a decision yet.

4. We hoped you’d accept 8%.
   We were hoping you’d accept 8%.

5. We discussed the problem yesterday.
   We were discussing the problem yesterday.

Notice, in every case the simple past gives the impression that the speaker means “this is what I/we did before we started our present discussion”; it gives the impression that the person s/he is speaking to is excluded.

In contrast, the continuous form, used with verbs like hope, discuss etc., gives the impression of including the other partner in the discussion. For this reason continuous forms seem more friendly and open, and are often appropriate if you are trying to engage the other person in an open negotiation.
10. Stressed words

Grammar and vocabulary are, of course, important in getting your meaning across. Less obviously, but equally importantly, the words which you give special stress to can change the meaning of what you say. Contrast this pair:

It's rather a large house.
It's rather a large house.
The most important use of this kind is the word quite. If quite is stressed, it is a qualification (quite interested, but not very). But if the following adjective is stressed, quite means very (quite interested).

Say these examples so that you give the meaning very:

1. We're quite interested in your suggestion.
2. We were quite pleased with their proposal.
3. We will be quite disappointed if we can't reach agreement today.
4. We think that's quite a useful contribution to the discussion.
5. He's quite capable of helping us out of our difficulties.
6. The new figures are quite exciting.

Stress quite in these examples — make sure you understand how strong or weak each phrase is:

7. That's quite different from our own suggestion.
8. We're quite satisfied with the preliminary figures.
9. We're quite certain we can deliver by the end of the month.

Remember, native speakers often use quite instead of very, but if it has the meaning of very, it is the word following quite which receives the heavy stress.

Stressed auxiliaries

Many English verb forms which look the same on paper, have two different forms in speech. In one case, the auxiliary verb, or part of the verb (be) is stressed, and in the other case this word is unstressed. The two sentences do not mean the same thing. Usually parts of (be) in auxiliary verbs in English are unstressed. Sometimes, there is a special way of writing these unstressed forms:

I've sent you the details already.
It's four o'clock.

Sometimes, there is no special way of writing them but they are unstressed, and weakly pronounced:

We can make alternative arrangements. /kən/ not /kan/
We could meet again tomorrow. /kəd/ not /kud/

In every case, however, it is possible to give a heavy stress to the normally unstressed part of (be) or the auxiliary. If you do this, it shows special emotion is attached to what you say. It can be used to correct the other person:

I thought you were Belgian.
I am Belgian.

Or to give special emotion to what you say. Different emotions are possible — annoyance or surprise, for example. It is very difficult to use these patterns effectively, and you may be wiser to avoid them yourself. If you are listening to native speakers, however, it is important that you recognise the emotional force behind what they are saying.
Discuss what you think the speaker means if s/he says the following:

1. We **have** sent you the details already.
2. We **could** meet again tomorrow.
3. It **is** five o’clock.
4. We **are** waiting for your decision.
5. We **are** expecting a prompt reply.
6. We **have** tried to keep you fully informed.
7. We **were** disappointed.
8. We **do** need at least four months notice.
9. We **did** expect to make a decision today.
10. This question **does** need to be resolved very soon.

The language points discussed in this unit are general features of English. The features in English may be very different from your own language. It is up to you to decide if you want to use all of the language points discussed here. It is essential, however, if you are going to use English in meetings with native speakers, you are aware of the way they use English to make their message more direct, more tactful, more diplomatic etc.
Collocations

As well as vocabulary, grammar, and stress, there is another important way in which you can improve your control of the language of meetings. Certain words often occur together — a short term solution, a high priority. There are a very large number of these collocations (groups of words which often occur together) which are used in the language of meetings. We have identified more than 150 of these for you. They are spread through the different units of this book. Each of the exercises is similar, and arranged like the one below. Here is what you should do:

1. Alone, or in pairs or small groups, look at the words at the top of each Match and Complete activity. Try, without writing anything down, to make collocations using a word from the column on the left with one from the column on the right. In every case there is only one way that you can make all five collocations correctly in the activities. If you are left with words which you do not think make a correct pair, you will need to think again about the pairs you have already made.

2. When you have made five successful phrases, report them to the whole group, and agree on the correct phrases.

3. We suggest that, even now, you do not write them in your book. Instead, we suggest you try to fit each collocation into one of the example sentences which follow. Again, you can only do this in one way so that all the collocations fit.

4. We suggest that a few days or a week later you look again at the collocations, and write in the ones you can remember which you are sure are correct. You can use the sentences again to check. (The answers are given on page 127/128.)

When you are sure that you can identify the collocations correctly, you can write them in so that, as you work your way through the book, you will make for yourself a complete list of the correct collocations. Remember, writing the correct collocations into your book will help you to remember them — but don’t do this when you meet them for the first time.

Match and Complete

| a vested | step |
| a foregone | point |
| a disastrous | interest |
| a stop-gap | conclusion |
| a debatable | solution |

1. It was a __________________: everybody knew he’d get the job.

2. That’s a __________________. One should consider both sides of the problem and I can see merit in both of them.

3. As a __________________ I’m in favour, but we mustn’t forget that we still need to find something more permanent.

4. We have a __________________ in John’s election, because if Henry is elected, we’ll never get promoted.

5. Leaving the organization would be a __________________ as far as his career is concerned.
Group Work

Work in small groups. Look at the following “basic dialogues”. Using some of the language features discussed in this unit try to write the dialogue in language which is more suitable for the language of meetings.

1. My price is fair.
   I agree.

2. A bridge is better than a tunnel.
   I prefer the tunnel.

3. That is acceptable if you promise to deliver by the end of August.
   Impossible! But we promise the end of September.

4. We hope you’ll allow us 10% margin.
   We can’t. We expected you to suggest 5%.

5. What’s the maximum you’ll offer?
   What’s the minimum you’ll accept?
   Be more helpful!
   Be more helpful yourself!

Discussion

Working in English — Advantages and Disadvantages

Work in groups of 3 or 4 and decide whether you agree with the following statements. If you do, decide if it is an advantage or disadvantage for you.

1. Foreigners can ask for a repetition more than any native speaker could.
2. You are shown more respect because you are working in a foreign language.
3. Native speakers have more patience with foreigners.
4. Non-native speakers can always change their minds later by saying that they misunderstood.
5. You may not understand everything that is said to you.
6. You may have problems expressing what you want to say.
7. Native speakers notice, and are affected by, all your grammatical mistakes.
8. You may not understand all the non-verbal behaviour of native speakers.
9. Some of your non-verbal behaviour will not be understood by native speakers.
10. You understand English (or American) culture more than the English (or Americans) understand your culture.

What do you think are the main effects, advantages and disadvantages, of international groups using English when they meet together?