Some sociolinguistic aspects of professional dialogues

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1.   Introduction

The present contribution is meant to introduce some sociolinguistic aspects in professional dialogues, i.e. the matter which has been the focus of my research for the PhD dissertation. I am concentrating on dialogues in American English for the purpose of which I have been using **The Corpus of Spoken Professional American-English**.

This paper will present some results and conclusions that have been drawn so far and that I consider the most interesting. At the same time what needs to be emphasized is the fact that the research is of an on-going character and therefore there will surely be more conclusions to draw later on as I finalize my work on the dissertation.

The corpus in its entirety includes transcripts of conversations of various types occurring between 1994 and 1998. The corpus consists primarily of short interchanges by approximately 400 speakers centered on professional activities broadly tied to academics and politics, including academic politics. It contains 17 files divided into two main sub-corpora of a million words each. One sub-corpus consists of press conference transcripts from the White House, and therefore contains mostly question and answer sessions. The second sub-corpus is a record of faculty meetings at the University of North Carolina and Committee Meetings held at numerous locations around the United States to discuss the creation of various standardized national tests. In this second sub-corpus the interactions consist of questions and answers, but also involve statements and discussions of issues. (http://www.athel.com/corpdes.html)

1.1   Material under investigation

I myself am working with a sample of the corpus downloaded from the CSPAE website: http://www.athel.com. According to the authors, the sample differs from the actual corpus in the fact that some sections have been deleted in order to allow inclusion of several types of texts. I do believe, however, that even this 100-page-long sample of the corpus can provide us with relevant features and aspects which are typical of the language used in professional situations. The present analysis is thus based on the following four parts of the sample, the examples of which can be found in tables placed throughout this contribution:

SAMPLE 1: pp. 1-36   (National meetings on Reading tests)
SAMPLE 2: pp. 37-42   (University of North Carolina - faculty meetings)
SAMPLE 3: pp. 42-60   (Mathematics and Reading Committees - National Tests
                                        Initiative meetings)
SAMPLE 4: pp. 60-100   (Press Conferences in the White House)

1.2. Research objectives

In a sociolinguistic study, there are certain factors that are relevant for the particular way of speaking. As Janet Holmes explains, there are basically four of them: the participants, the social setting or context, the topic of the talk, and the function (i.e. the aim or purpose of the interaction) (Holmes 1998 [1992]:11). In the analyses below, relevant information concerning these factors will always be given in order to be able to study more closely certain sociolinguistic features. There are always numerous sociolinguistic features that can be studied in a text. I have decided here to focus on only a few which, as suggested earlier, are the most interesting, but also are all intertwined and at the same time connected with a common feature of formality. Formality and its varied range is thus a common denominator for all the samples as well as for individual sociolinguistic features out of which the following three are discussed in this contribution:

1. **direct address**
2. **subjectivity**
3. **syntactic structure**

These are connected with other features such as indirectness, impersonality, etc. the association with which I would like to outline and demonstrate below as well as the interconnectedness between the individual features themselves.

Before the analyses as such, I think necessary to define the sociolinguistic features that are discussed throughout this analysis, so that it is clear in which way the terms are being used.

Formality, according to the *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*, is a part of stylistic variation (depending on the situation, the topic, the participants, and the location) in which speakers tend to be more careful and aware of the pronunciation as well as the choice of words and sentence structure (Richards et al. 1992 [1985]:109, 278).

Address refers to the way in which people address one another in speech or writing (Richards et al. 1992 [1985]:4). I give examples of direct address, while I am aware of the fact that there is also a system of indirect addresses, i.e. a system of how people refer to those who are either not present or who do not participate in the dialogue directly.

Subjectivity, according to *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, refers to 'a state or quality of being subjective' (1996:1893) where subjective means 'pertaining to or characteristic of an individual; personal; individual' (1996:1893). In this sense, the opposite to subjective would be **objective**, which, according to the same source, refers to 'something that can be known' or 'something existing independent of thought or an observer as part of reality'; 'not influenced by personal feelings, interpretations, or prejudice; based on facts; unbiased'. (1996:1336). Oftentimes, however, it is difficult to tell to what degree the statement is unbiased and completely free of the speaker's personal judgment. It is thus safer to connect the opposite of subjectivity to the concept of **impersonality**: impersonal structure would then be defined as 'a type of sentence in which there is no mention of who or what does or experiences something' (Richards et al. 1992:136).

As I have mentioned above another of the features accompanying the three main ones and discussed and illustrated in this analysis is **indirectness**—the last term to be explained. The *Webster's Dictionary* defines **indirect** as something 'not straightforward' or 'not direct in action or procedure' (1996:973).

Let us continue with the actual examples from the dialogue samples described above and their sociolinguistic analysis.

2.   Corpus analysis

This second part of the present contribution deals with the actual study of the sociolinguistic features based on the analyses of the four samples of the corpus introduced in part one. The three sociolinguistic features discussed are: direct address, subjectivity, and syntactic structure. The reason for which I chose to order the features this way is connected with the fact that I find them important and interesting in that order.

2.1.   Direct address

	Sample 1	**Sample 2**	**Sample 3**	**Sample 4**
A.	Strickland: *'<u>Suzanne Clewell</u>, we're delighted to have you with us today. <u>Suzanne</u>, would you tell us a little bit about what you do?'* (p. 1)	Brown: *'Ah, good, <u>Larry</u>, from the Center for Teaching and Learning, thank you, <u>Larry, Larry Rowan.</u>'* (p. 39)	Dossey: *'And we will begin this morning with testimony by <u>Tim Schlenvogt</u> who's representing the National Association of Secondary School Principals. We welcome you, <u>Tim</u>.'* (p. 46)	Voice: *'<u>Dee Dee</u>, has the President spoken with anyone in the Israeli government…?'* (p. 67)
B.	Strickland: *'We will really turn to you as a very important source, <u>Judith</u>.'* (p. 1)	Brown: *'Come on up, <u>David</u>.'* (p. 42) Bayne: *'Thanks, <u>Garland</u>.'* (p. 41)	Martin: *'<u>Fran</u>, if we go back over this question for a minute.'* (p. 60)	Myers: *'I'm not sure, <u>Deborah</u>, and I'll have to take it and get back to you.'* (p. 69)
C.	Kapinus: *'<u>Dorothy</u>, I might add also that…'* (p. 1)	Bayne: *'And I thank you, <u>Pam</u>, because I think the Committee's done a great job.'* (p. 41)	Berry: *'Yes, <u>Gary</u>.'* (p. 55)	Myers: *'<u>Dave</u>, do you <u>guys</u> know?'* (p. 89)

- **Sample 1:**

Sample 1 consists of meetings of the national Reading Committee where the participants try to discuss issues concerning national standardized reading tests.

The meetings themselves seem to be quite informal but still maintained on a professional level. There is abundance of examples of participants addressing one another by their first names. As shown in the table above in the example A, we do find, however, examples of addressing a person by their full name. This is done, in my opinion, for the reason of introducing the person in question to others, who might not be familiar with that person at all. I do not believe that a person would be addressed by their full name to show extra prestige or importance, this is done strictly for introductory reasons. I am concluding

this from the fact that the same person is never addressed by their full name again. However, this phenomenon could also be explained by looking at the relationship among the participants: generally speaking, at this meeting, they are professionally all colleagues. They all come from different backgrounds of different educational and professional experiences which is extremely relevant for meeting the objective of their get together. As participants, they are thus perfectly equal.

Dorothy Strickland, whose quotes can be found in the table above, is a professor of reading at the Graduate School of Education of Rutgers University in New Jersey and at the same time a chairperson and a host of the Reading Committee meetings. Suzanne Clewell that Ms Strickland is directly addressing in example A above is a coordinator of reading language arts for Montgomery County Public Schools in Rockville, Maryland. At the same time she is a member of the National Reading Committee (http://www.athel.com/corpsp.html; pp. 11, 2).

By studying Ms Strickland's way of speaking and behaving, we see that she is aware of the fact that she is in the center of importance within their meeting – she knows what her responsibilities are (directing the discussions, introducing new participants, etc.). On the other hand we see that she considers the other participants her equal: she is trying to establish a very friendly and informal atmosphere and rapport with and among others. This gives the participants an opportunity to feel her equal as well and therefore directly address her the same way she addresses them, i.e. by the first name (see example C above: Kapinus: *'Dorothy, I might add also that…'* - p. 1).

- **Sample 2:**

Sample 2 consists of faculty meetings at the University of North Carolina. In comparison with Sample 1, these meetings appear to be less informal. Still we find almost exclusively examples of participants addressing one another by their first names as shown in the table above. Within this sample, we do find examples of addressing through full names as well but, as in Sample 1, used for introductory reasons.

The relationship among the participants should be considered as well in order to understand the difference in formality between this sample and the previous one.

Jane D. Brown—we find examples of her addresses in the table above—is a professor at the University of North Carolina and the chair of the faculty, who is presiding the faculty meetings covered here. Larry Rowan that Ms Brown is directly addressing in the example A above is a professor of astronomy and physics at the University of North Carolina. (http://www.athel.com/corpsp.html, pp. 2, 10).

Professionally, all the participants of the meeting are colleagues.

The atmosphere itself is rather friendly and relaxed: the participants, including the chair, are using uniform ways of addressing one another, i.e. mostly first names, rarely full names (especially for introductory reasons), as described above.

Apart from the atmosphere, we need to look at the context or the setting and the quantity of direct addresses as well. We see that the chair of the meeting, takes the floor very frequently for long monologues. She takes her responsibilities connected with her position very seriously and as she is very well aware of the fact that she is in the center of all attention, she directly addresses her colleagues in a lesser extent than did Dorothy Strickland in Sample 1, thus becoming more impersonal or detached. At the same time, even though Ms Brown is professionally the participants' colleague, we do not find a single example of the participants addressing Ms Brown directly or indirectly in any way. That means everybody accepts her as the detached leading force in the meeting while they freely address others by first names without any restriction.

- **Sample 3:**

Sample 3 involves Reading Committee and Mathematics Committee, coming together at a number of national test initiative meetings. In its formality, this sample appears to be placed between the two previous samples.

We see the first names used on many occasions while addressing participants. When a person is introduced to others and addressed at the same time, it is done in an impersonal way (see example A above). The number of direct addresses by first names is higher than in Sample 1, on the other hand, however, Sample 1 gives a more personal impression unlike this Sample 3.

Let us have a look at the relationship among participants again in order to clarify even more the different level of formality in this sample.

John A. Dossey – quoted in the examples in the table above – is a professor of mathematics at the Illinois State University and at the same time is a member of the Mathematics Committee and a chairperson or a host of the joint Committee meetings covered in this sample. Tim Schlenvogt is a principal of a middle school in Colorado and a member of the Mathematics Committee. (http://www.athel.com/corpsp.html, pp. 3, 10).

As in the samples above, the participants are professionally colleagues. The atmosphere is friendly and relaxed. The forms of direct addresses are similar to the previous samples: mostly first names; rarely full names (especially for introductory reasons). The host of the meetings gives floor mostly to others and only speaks himself when introducing a new speaker or redirecting the flow of the dialogue. He is aware of his position of a host and therefore he is trying to be objective thus creating a certain feeling of impersonality during the introduction of speakers to others (see example A above). On the other hand, he gives an equal effort to create a personal atmosphere by abundantly addressing the known speakers by their first names. The result of these two facts is that we do not find an example of other participants directly addressing Mr Dossey in any way; we do, however, find instances of indirect address: Phillips: *'I have a comment and also a question, following up on what <u>John</u> just said.'* (p. 51). The participants, therefore, accept Mr Dossey's position of a host but at the same time recognize the close distance among all of them, unlike in sample 2.

- **Sample 4:**

Sample 4 is set into the context of several Press Conferences held at the White House.

This sample, from the point of view of the setting and language, is by far the most formal of all the samples.

There are no instances of speakers introducing others in this part of the corpus. For us, readers of the corpus, the only two people that are known by name are the Press Secretary of the White House, Dee Dee Myers, and a White House Official, David Seldin. All the other participants of the talks are anonymous and marked merely as 'Voice'. (http://www.athel.com/corpsp.html, pp. 9, 11). This also contributes to the fact that the sample gives an impression of being impersonal, especially when taking into consideration the scarce number of direct address occurrences. When there are such instances, we find merely first names being used: see e.g. example A above, which is one of the two instances where the Press Secretary is directly addressed by her name throughout the whole sample.

Studying the relationship among the participants, we find it more pronounced than in the previous samples. There is Ms Myers and a limited group of White House officials on one side, and a group of the anonymous journalists on the other. Even though Ms Myers is in the center of all attention, she is far from making it perfectly clear to the participants. She does

not seem to have as much a leading power in the dialogues as the hosts/chairs in the previous samples. I believe this is given by the setting, i.e. question-answer sessions where journalists are the ones in control of the interaction, which is not occurring among them individually, but between them and Ms Myers. As can be seen in the examples in the table above, Ms Myers herself tries to be personal and to create a friendly atmosphere, connected with the fact that she considers all the participants equal: in the seriousness of the situation, she is only partially successful, however.

It is interesting to comment on the example C in the table above where Ms Myers is addressing David Seldin, a White House official, by a little modification of his first name, **Dave**. In the same sentence, however, she changes the target by making Mr Seldin a member of a larger group to which he officially belongs, and thus redistributing the responsibility initially put solely on Mr Seldin. The way she does that, i.e. by using the word **guys**, makes the situation appear less formal, thus compensating for the seriousness and partial stiffness of the whole matter.

2.2.   Subjectivity

	Sample 1	**Sample 2**	**Sample 3**	**Sample 4**
A.	Mandel: *'**We are confident that you can do that'** (p. 3); Mandel: *'**We sort of welcome you to provide us either…'** (p. 3) x Mandel: *'if **anyone** wants to distribute it themselves'* (p. 3) Mandel: *'**one finds it attractive'** (p. 5) Strickland: *'**some people have only had a chance to glance at it.'** (p. 12)	Brown: *'**our radical faculty group'** (p. 37) Brown: *'**we met'** (p. 37) x Brown: *'**How many, **anybody** ever participated in that before?'** (p. 39)	Dossey: *'**we'll begin this morning with…'** (p. 42) Berry: *'at the same time, **we** would like for the committee to think…'* (p. 53) x Dossey: *'And maybe, **we'll** just start in the corner and have **everyone** introduce themselves at the table.'* (p. 42)	Myers: *'**We're not** – that is incorrect. **We** are seeing other people, certainly.'* (p. 66) x Myers: *'**I** think that the parameters of the statute…'* (p. 69) Myers: *'**I don't** think that that's that hard…'* (p. 67)
B.	Mandel: *'**I** don't know if **you** noticed.'* (p. 2); Mandel: *'with help and participation from **all of you**'* (p. 3); Strickland: *'**You're** the next person, Barbara.'* (p. 4)	Brown: *'as **you** know'* (p. 37) Moriaty: *'**you** need to send a new survey'* (p. 39) Brown: *'**I** encourage **you all** to speak with **us** about how this can proceed.'* (p. 38); Brown: *'**I've** been spending a lot of **our** time.'* (p. 38)	Berry: *'Personally, **I** would prefer knowing'* (p. 57) Mandel: *'if **you** can just a little more, cite the logistics about why **you** advocate…'* (p. 58)	Voice: *'what **you folks** have in mind?'* (p. 75)

- **Sample 1:**

Sample 1 has been identified as an informal part of the corpus. This fact might go hand in hand, to a certain degree, with the fact that it is quite personal. We do find examples of personal features: *I* being used very often; *we* being used often to represent a professional group of people, or we could say the institutional *we*. In the example A above, to be more specific, the institutional *we* represents the Center for Curriculum and Professional Development that Mr David Mandel is the director of. (http://www.athel.com/corpsp.html; p. 8). The consequence of the institutional *we* being used is the fact that Mr Mandel gains confidence and power and creates two sides of debaters: himself, the employees of the Center, and those participating in their project on one side and all the other participants on the other. *You* is used quite often in a direct address of speakers. At the same time, however, we do find examples of features which fall into the category of impersonal aspects: *anyone* (p. 3) or *some people* (p. 12), as seen in the example B above, used for reasons of avoiding direct assignment of responsibilities. Such instances of detachment are not, however, very numerous.

- **Sample 2:**

Sample 2 is more formal than Sample 1. We see examples of passive used on various occasions: mostly for reasons of detachment (syntactic features will be discussed later). On the other hand, however, we find examples of *you*, *I*, and the institutional *we* (in example A referring to the radical faculty group, i.e. Faculty Legislative Liaison Committee, p. 37), and even a combination of the last two in: *I encourage you all to speak with us about how this can proceed.* (p. 38) or *I've been spending a lot of our time.* (p. 38), where—in both these instances—the institutional *we*, or *us/our* in our cases, refer, according to Ms Brown, to the Executive Committee of the Faculty Council. (p. 37). This is an interesting feature: the first part, i.e. *encourage* and *spending*, is connected with the speaker personally, but the latter part of the utterance, i.e. *speaking* and *time*, is connected with the committee. This phenomenon might have to do with power: the speaker feels her words will be of a stronger effect if she uses the institutional form versus her own personal feelings. Such a distribution of responsibility is more plausible and more acceptable for listeners.

I would also like to comment on the fact that the same speaker is using the institutional *we* on numerous occasions, while referring to different institutions. This feature seems to be typical of professional settings: versatility and at the same time the fact that the listeners will understand the switch from one group into another without much explanation.

- **Sample 3:**

As in Sample 2, we see a mixture of personal and impersonal features. We have passives and causatives which make the part sound impersonal. And at the same time we have active voice used as well as pronouns *I*, *we*, *you*, making it sound personal. The institutional *we* in the example A above refers to, in case of Mr Dossey, the gathering of the committee as such, i.e. to everybody present, which makes the situation appear very acceptable and accessible for everyone. In case of Mr Fran Berry (who is a member of the Mathematics Committee, but at the same time serves on the board of directors of the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics and works as a Principal Investigator with the Colorado Statewide Systemic Initiative – p. 52), his use of *we* is meant to refer to the last two institutions given in the account right above, in order to gain power and plausibility. On the other hand, we do find examples of impersonal *everyone* (p. 42) which also contribute to

a detachment, but these are rather exceptional. In general, Sample 3 seems to be inclining more towards Sample 1, which is in my opinion very personal.

- **Sample 4:**

Sample 4 tends to be, as analyzed above, the most formal and analogically the most impersonal of all (shown by abundant use of passive – talked about later). In my opinion, in this sample, we see clearly the borders between the institutional *we* and the personal *I*. In the cases when Ms Myers is speaking about the White House, its residents and officials, including herself, she refers to them as *we*. Once she starts giving her own opinions, she readily begins using *I*. It also appears as though the institutional *we* gives her more power or more confidence in the midst of the eager journalists. On the other hand, she seems to be uncertain and indirect within the scope of using *I*.

My last comment concerning this sample and regarding subjectivity deals with the example B stated in the table above: *what you folks have in mind?* (p. 75). It might seem slightly unfitting into the context of the highly impersonal and professional White House press conference. I believe, however, that this only makes the atmosphere less tense than it already is, bringing the participants of the conference together more. It might also be connected with the American culture of this natural feeling of coming closer to other people, no matter what the hierarchy should be in our Czech eyes. It certainly brings about a feeling of understanding and humanity, especially considering the fact that it was uttered by a journalist and was directed towards Ms Myers and the White House as such.

2.3. Syntactic structure

	Sample 1	**Sample 2**	**Sample 3**	**Sample 4**
A.	Langer: *'I'm delighted to be here.'* (p.1) x Strickland: *'We will really turn to you as a very important source, Judith.'* (p. 1)	Brown: *'I've been spending'* (p. 38) Brown: *'it's going to be coming out'* (p. 39)	Phillips: *'We're really entering into a new era here.'* (p. 45) x Phillips: *'We will also have…'* (p. 45) Schlenvogt: *'That is found on page 37'* (p. 47)	Myers: *'We'll take a look at that and let you know'* (p. 60) x Voice: *Is it also not a coincidence…?* (p. 67) Myers: *'It will not happen today.'* (p. 100)
B.	Mandel: *'suggested that we do'* (p. 5); Johnston: *'suggestion that they be added'* (p. 23); Mandel: *'ought to be part of…'* (p. 14) Mandel: *'hotel conspiring against*	Conover: *'it's very important that the faculty, particularly those serving on search committees, continue to recognize'* (p. 41)	Schlenvogt: *'We further encourage that end service be provided…'* (p. 48) Schlenvogt: *'We support the idea that there be easy to understand…'* (p. 48) Schlenvogt: *'We support that*	Myers: *'testified as to this'* (p. 70) Voice: *'he would recommend that not just the agencies ought to be examined to see and that there be full tracking…'* (p. 74); Myers: *'I ain't*

	us last night <u>to not</u> deliver…' (p. 2);		*calculators and manipulatives be used'* (p. 48)	*getting…'* (p. 90) Myers: *'people should care about this, how <u>does it affect</u> the United States.'* (p. 71)
C.	Mandel: *'work that <u>has been done</u> to date'* (p. 3) Kapinus: *'We need to look at the special populations that <u>are usually impacted</u> by time.'* (p. 9) x Mandel: *'nature of what <u>we expect</u> the kids to do'* (p. 7)	Brown: *'If cuts <u>are to be made</u>, we need...'* (p. 37) Brown: *'We need <u>to be involved</u> in deciding what measures <u>should be used</u>…'* (p. 37) x Brown: *'<u>I will ask</u> for volunteers.'* (p. 38) Brown: *'where <u>we might cut if we need to</u>'* (p. 38)	Phillips: *'in which <u>it will be released</u>'* (p. 44) Schlenvogt: *'too much time <u>is already spent</u>'* (p. 47) *Causative*: Berry: *'students who could <u>have the test read to them</u>'* (p. 53) x Phillips: *'<u>I have a comment on what John said.</u>'* (p. 51); Schlenvogt: *'<u>we will ensure that</u>…'* (p. 48)	Voice*: 'whether compensation <u>should be made</u> to all <u>who have been affected</u>'* (p. 61) x Myers: *'<u>I'm not sure that she asked for permission, but it is something that she's discussed</u> with White House officials.'* (p. 61)

As I have mentioned above, the previous sociolinguistic feature analyzed, i.e. subjectivity vs. impersonality, is shown not only in the particular notions and expressions but also in the syntactic structure which is dealt with as last.

- **Sample 1:**

We find numerous examples in this sample which prove both formality and informality. Contracted forms are very common. Full forms (<u>*We will* really turn to you as a very important source, Judith.</u> (p. 1) as given in example A in the table) are mostly used for emphasis or underlining the importance of the person talked to. At the end of example B it is interesting to notice the unusual word order in the sentence: *conspiring against us <u>to not deliver</u>* (p. 2) (instead of *not to deliver*), making it sound rather non-standard and thus stressing and drawing attention to the negative particle.

On the other hand, we see a lot of structures proving high level of formality. Such structures compensate for the enormous informality but they also appear to be used for reasons of underlining and maintaining the professional and technical level: see for example the use of subjunctive: *suggestion <u>that they be</u> added* (p. 23).

As far as the usage of passive versus active voice is concerned, we find examples of both. Even though active voice makes it sound more personal, it is true that the passive adds objectivity and professionalism to the speech. At the same time, there might be purely pragmatic reasons for using the passive: speakers might not want to mention the agent in order to avoid assigning responsibility, or the agent is unknown or completely irrelevant.

- **Sample 2:**

As in Sample 1, we find a lot of contracted forms in given examples making it appear rather informal but as in Sample 1 the informalities used here are only to compensate for the highly formal and technical context of faculty meetings. I do believe that, from the point of view of quantity, there are more formal expressions and structures than there are informal ones, thus still keeping the sample very professional.

As mentioned above, Sample 2 is more formal than Sample 1. We see, therefore, examples of passive used on various occasions: mostly for reasons of detachment but at the same time for reasons of avoiding the distribution of responsibility (*If cuts <u>are to be made</u>* – p. 37).

- **Sample 3:**

In Sample 3 we find enough examples of contracted forms versus full forms; the latter being used for emphasis of formality and seriousness of the matter, unlike the former one. We see many instances of the subjunctive used, as seen in the table, to mark high formality. The mixture of these formal and informal features, however, makes the sample fit perfectly into the scope of professional dialogues. As in Sample 2, we have passives and causatives which make the part sound detached and impersonal. At the same time we have active voice used as well making it appear to be the opposite – personal and subjective.

- **Sample 4:**

Sample 4 has been identified as the most formal and the most technical of all the samples. We find therefore numerous examples of full forms versus contracted forms and a lot of structures of high formality, such as subjunctive. On the other hand, however, we find some examples of informal nature: *I <u>ain't</u> getting…* (p. 90). In my opinion, informal features of the speech compensate significantly for the tense atmosphere one can feel from the question-answer session in the highly formal situation of the White House. Such 'leveling' makes the situation more accessible for an impartial observer.

I also have to make a comment on the word order in: *people should care about this, how <u>does it affect</u> the United States.* (p. 71). This is an indirect question where the word order should be kept the same as in a regular statement. It is not here, however. It seems as though the speaker implies a direct question behind it, only drawing listeners' attention to it and having them think about the statement, i.e. question, more deeply.

As far as the usage of passive is concerned, we find abundant examples, illustrating impersonality, while the active, at least concluding from the latter part of example C given above (*<u>I'm not sure</u> that <u>she asked</u> for permission, but it is something that <u>she's discussed</u> with White House officials.* – p. 61), seems to pursue the idea of precise distribution of responsibility. The speaker clearly wants to state the agent of the action in the sentences thus imposing the responsibility fully onto the person in question, making the statement very personal and direct.

3.   Theoretical background

In the examples and analyses given above I have drawn on my own findings. In order to support them with an existing theory and at the same time make a more relevant comparison between the individual samples, I would like to present Janet Holmes' theory of

social dimensions. There are four different dimensions related to the social factors described in the Introduction above (Holmes 1998 [1992]:12):

1. A *social distance* scale concerned with participant relationships
2. A *status* scale concerned with participant relationships
3. A *formality* scale relating to the setting or type of interaction
4. Two *functional* scales relating to the purposes or topic of interaction

The *social distance* scale is based on a horizontal axis of solidarity, with intimate social distance, i.e. high solidarity, on one end and distant social distance, i.e. low solidarity, on the other (Holmes 1998 [1992]:12).

The *status scale* is, on the contrary, based on a vertical axis with superior, i.e. high status, on one end and subordinate, i.e. low status, on the other (Holmes 1998 [1992]:12).

These theories become significant for our samples when studying especially the direct addresses and the subjectivity, i.e. the features where the relationships among participants were relevant. By looking back at the direct addresses, for example, we see that their forms, i.e. the usage of first names, are common for all the samples. The addressing in the American English is thus based on the social distance, i.e. the solidarity theory. All the participants are colleagues, i.e. professionally of equal status. The difference between the samples is in the distance or familiarity among the participants: the first sample representing the high solidarity, the fourth sample the low solidarity and samples 2 and 3 being placed in between the two—all based on the description given in the individual analyses. Similar case would be with subjectivity, i.e. how personal or detached on the other hand the speaker could be, which means on what point on the scale he would be placed in connection with the relationship with other participants. Again, sample one being the most intimate one as opposed to sample four being the most distant or detached one.

The status scale, on the other hand, would be more shown in the context of Czech professional situations, for example. We would find examples of different forms of address (from first names to Mr X to Mr Professor, etc.), thus clearly defining the status of the individual participants.

In our samples, this vertical axis becomes relevant when studying indirect addresses, i.e. when participants are referring to a third person either present or absent, thus when the relationships among professionals become more varied by widening the circle of participants.

The *formality scale* is based on a vertical axis with high formality on one end and low formality on the other (Holmes 1998 [1992]:13). It basically reflects the influence of the context on the way of speaking, which could be studied throughout all the examples above. It probably shows the best in the last part, i.e. in the syntactic structure. By studying the number of full forms, subjunctives, passives, etc.—being connected more with the higher formality— versus contracted forms, actives—connected with the lower formality, we see, again, that sample one would be on the lower—informal—end of the axis whereas sample four would be found on the higher – formal – end, with samples 2 and 3 being placed in the middle.

The last scale—the *functional scale*—is divided into two sub-categories: a *referential scale* which is defined as a horizontal axis with high information content on one end and low information content on the other; and a horizontal *affective scale* with high affective content on one end and low affective content on the other. Basically the referential scale refers to the degree of the information given in the utterance whereas the affective scale expresses the degree of the speaker's inner feelings present in the utterance (Holmes 1998 [1992]:14). Taking into consideration the fact that our dialogues, i.e. samples, are set in a professional setting, we have to conclude that all the utterances are generally found on the higher end of

the referential scale, i.e. containing a high degree of information, and at the same time they are on the lower end of the affective scale, i.e. containing a low degree of affection or emotion. This scale, however, will be studied further in the context of our dialogues. For this particular paper it has not been the major focus, unlike the preceding three scales discussed above.

4.   Conclusions

In the present paper, I tried to outline certain sociolinguistic features, to be more specific, the direct address, subjectivity, and syntactic structure, connected with indirectness, impersonality and mostly with formality, and the way they work in professional dialogues in American English. I illustrated the features on examples from four samples of the Corpus of Spoken Professional American English, downloaded from http://www.athel.com. At the same time I tried to support my conclusions with an existing theory of social dimensions by Janet Holmes and thus compare the individual samples on the theoretical basis.

The conclusions thus drawn can be summarized as follows: even though all the four samples of the professional dialogues are similar from the perspective of a professional setting, they are at the same time very different. The features analyzed show that every situation depends on the speakers and the relationships among them; the context, even though professional, is always different; the topic and the function or the purpose of the talk are always different. We always have to consider these factors in order to correctly assess each utterance and at the same time it is necessary to be cautious in generalizations concerning the functions of the individual features and their outcomes.

I also need to make clear that the research and its conclusions shown so far are only a part of a bigger and more complex study and therefore there will be more outcomes and conclusions to give and support later on as I finalize my work on the PhD dissertation.

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