ROUTINE BRIEFINGS; AN ANALYSIS OF SCRIPTED MIXED REGISTER FROM THE ROYAL AIR FORCE OF OMAN

by
Neil McBeath

Introduction

The following paper will attempt to analyse the pragmatic considerations underlying the routine briefings given on Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) BAC 111 flights within the Sultanate of Oman. These flights constitute a scheduled service between Muscat and the RAFO bases at Masirah, Salalah and Thumrait, and may be used by serving personnel of the Sultan's Armed Forces, retired officers, civil servants and their dependents. To all intents and purposes, the flights operate in the same way as commercial Oman Air services within Oman, but there are minor differences which are reflected in stricter security procedures on boarding, reduced in-flight service and the language of address.

To begin with, all the flight personnel, including the cabin crew, are members of a military hierarchy, with the result that the flight attendants regularly encounter passengers who either outrank them, or who they themselves outrank. Thomas (1995:170) gives an interesting example of the extent to which power differential may influence military discourse: 'You are to stand to attention in the center of your room every time the door is opened. You are to obey all orders given to you by any member of the remand staff at all times', but clearly such directness would be inappropriate and, at times, offensive to the addressees if it were used on a BAC 111 flight.

The routine briefings, therefore, open considerations of register and power (Fairclough 1988; 1989) because the RAFO cabin crew have to endeavour to meet the expectations of their passengers, while they are unable to offer the type of service available on commercial flights.

RAFO provides a basic transport service, but there is no in-flight entertainment, no provision of refreshment other than one serving of still mineral water and only a minimum crew – usually three flight attendants, one of whom must be female. The routine briefings are given in both Arabic and English, and fall into four sections; Before take off, After take-off, Before landing and After landing. There are also instructions for passengers who remain on board after shut down (Salalah via Thumrait to Muscat) and for night landings and take-offs, but these are seldom used, as all scheduled flights occur in daylight hours.

Before take-off

I have chosen to follow Fairclough in using the term 'mixed register', though it is open to debate whether routine briefings should be regarded as a genre (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993) or as a register (Halliday and Hasan 1975; Ghadessy 1988). Candlin and Maley (1995:2) suggest that 'sometimes these terms can be used interchangeably', but on balance the term 'register' appears to be more appropriate. The routine briefing is a linguistic situation where Halliday's (1978:31) three variables 'first, as regards to what is actually taking place; secondly, as regards what part the language is playing; and thirdly, as regards who is taking part' apply.

Routine briefings are unusual in that, like the language of broadcast talks and news (Crystal and Davy 1969), they employ a language that has been written to be read aloud; but it differs from broadcast language because it is also designed to be reinforced by gesture. Unlike broadcast talks and news, moreover, routine briefings carry a force in law. On RAFO flights the routine briefing is a compulsory part of the take-off procedure, and a formal Standing Order requires that the briefing be given prior to take-off. On commercial flights, airlines would be subject to severe legal penalties if it could be proved that passengers had been left unaware of safety procedures, or had suffered

injury because the routine briefing had been omitted or curtailed. British Airways, Emirates, Gulf Air, KLM and Qatar Airways have now ensured that this is impossible on their intercontinental flights, by creating flight safety videos which cover all aspects in minute detail, and these are shown to embarking passengers. On shorter flights, they may use a voice-over, while cabin staff demonstrate the use of safety equipment.

In the following analysis, I have numbered the sentences in the English version of the RAFO routine briefing, and have divided it according to its macro-markers (Chaudron and Richards 1986).

(1) Good morning/afternoon/evening ladies and gentlemen.

(2) Welcome on board this BAC 111 for your flight to …...

(3) Our flight time will be…. and we will be flying at a height of …. thousand feet.

This is the initial phase of the routine briefing, and it consists of a macro-marker, a performative, a tacit checking mechanism, and what can best be described as the establishment of a script (Schank and Abelson 1977). The greeting by the flight attendant could be understood as a call for attention, or indicate what Levinson (1988:309) describes as an 'opening section'. The greeting serves as a summons, but also as a macro-marker. The passengers have already boarded the plane and been seated, but for the first time they are being directly addressed by the cabin crew.

The performative (Austin 1961) 'Welcome on board' – I hereby welcome you on board – is followed by the announcement of the aircraft's destination. This could be regarded as a tacit request for the passengers to verify that they are on the correct flight, for while security on RAFO flights is strict enough to ensure that passengers do not board the wrong aircraft, mistakes of this kind have been known to occur on commercial airlines.[1] It is at this stage, before take-off, that

anyone on the wrong flight should leave the plane; the illocutionary force of this statement may, therefore, have a perlocutionary effect on the addressee.

The final statement (3) is an anachronism from the early days of flying, when it was expected that passengers would be impressed by statistics, but it now serves as a preparation for the 'central' safety briefing. It 'frames' the situation by evoking 'a body of knowledge…in order to provide an inferential base for the understanding of an utterance' (Levinson 1983:231). It is now accepted that the flight attendant will speak without interruption and the passengers will listen.

The use of 'our flight time' and 'we shall be flying' can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it gives complicity to the enterprise, suggesting that the passengers and crew are engaged in a joint venture. Alternatively, the possession of technical information serves to align the flight attendants with the authority of the technical crew (primarily the pilot).

(4) May I now have your attention please for the safety briefing.

This is the second macro-marker, and the use of 'may' and 'please' introduce a redressive action (Brown and Levinson 1987) to the face-threatening aspect of a direct order. The term 'safety briefing' is directly used, to emphasise the importance of the information that is about to be given; this sentence also cues the arrival of a second flight attendant, who will gesture after each of the following moves. It should be stressed at this point that the flight attendant does not act in dumb-show, or indulge in the pantomime body glosses described by Goffman (1971). The gestures are purposeful in intent, and designed to be easily interpreted.

(5) Emergency exits, there are five on this aircraft.

(6) Two doors at the front.
(*Flight attendant indicates the space between the flight deck and the main cabin*).

(7) Two escape windows, with the handles clearly marked, in the center of the aircraft.
(*Flight attendant indicates the wings*).

(8) And one door at the rear.
(*Flight attendant indicates with one arm only*).

(9) This aircraft is equipped with emergency oxygen.

(10) Should this be required, masks like this… will drop from the panel above you.
(*Flight attendant demonstrates with specimen mask*).

(11) Place the mask over your mouth and nose, fasten the strap around your head, and breathe normally.
(*Flight attendant demonstrates, turning left and right in profile*).

(12) A lifejacket is located under your seat cushion.
(*Flight attendant holds up a specimen jacket and indicates its position under the seat*).

(13) Before take-off please read the safety leaflet which you will find in the seat pocket in front of you.
(*Flight attendant displays a safety leaflet and indicates the pocket*).

(14) All passengers are reminded that there is no smoking on this aircraft.

In this section there are five separate moves, which change as the theme changes. The priority given to the emergency exits is clear from

the dispreferred, marked topic in Sentence (4), 'Emergency exits, there are five…'. The careful scripting of Sentences (5)-(8), with the text broken to allow the second flight attendant time for bodily enactment, testifies to the importance of this frame.

Sentences (9)-(11), by contrast, suggest that the need for emergency oxygen is likely to be remote – 'Should this be required…' – allowing a series of 'bald' imperatives to be used. Mey (2001:80) explains 'I can use a "bald" imperative if the order is beneficial to my addressee', and in this case the ability to keep breathing oxygen is clearly beneficial. A list of 'bald' imperatives can also be embedded in a suitably mitigated frame, as in this instance: 'Should oxygen be required, do this, do that, do the other'. Once again, the directives are carefully scripted, giving the addressees the 'minimum sufficient condition that will bring about the state of affairs specified by the directive' (Holdcroft 1978:98).

Sentence (12) indicates the presence of a safety feature, but makes no further reference to it. This is in marked contrast with the flight safety briefings of commercial airlines, which invariably go into details of how to put on the life jacket, leave the aircraft, top up the air in the jacket and use the light and whistle. In this case the difference may be explained by the fact that most RAFO flights spend only a few minutes overflying the sea, and the chance of requiring the life jacket is remote. It must be mentioned in the briefing, but the choice of the passive 'is located' superficially reduces the sentence to a broadly informative statement. It retains, however, the un-highlighted illocutionary force of a very weak directive 'If necessary, get the lifejacket from under your seat…'

Sentence (13) requires action from the passengers, but it is interesting to note that no mechanism is available to ensure that the passengers do, in fact, read the safety leaflet. By providing the leaflet and requesting that it be read, commercial airlines cover themselves against insurance claims in the event of accidents, and RAFO appear to be following the same procedure.

The regulatory Sentence (14), by contrast, is presented in a non-face-threatening manner, in accordance with Brown and Levinson's

(1987:136) strategy for deferential politeness 'State the FTA [the face-threatening act] as a general rule'. Bilingual 'No Smoking' signs are clearly visible, which explains the use of the verb 'remind', and the use of the passive disassociates the flight attendant from the prohibition. Commercial airlines tend to suggest that this rule is for the addressees' own benefit – 'For your own comfort and safety…'

(15) Please follow cabin staff instructions at all times.

(16) Would you now ensure that your seat back is upright, the arms lowered and that your seat belt is fastened.

(17) Thank you for your attention.

(18) We hope you will enjoy your flight.

At first sight, Sentence (15) sits rather awkwardly in this final section, as the topic suggests that it belongs in the central 'safety briefing'. In fact, the macro-marker that is expected is missing, and so the addressees are given no indication that the safety briefing has concluded, and that they are to prepare for take-off. The form of the language, however, is in marked contrast to that quoted by Thomas ('You are to obey all orders that are given to you by any member of the remand staff at all times'), though it achieves its effect by the redressive action of the word 'please'. It also gives authority to the redressive action of 'would' which is followed by another bald imperative 'ensure' in Sentence (16). In this case, the cabin crew will actually check that this injunction has been followed, by walking the length of the cabin and assisting passengers with seats and seat belts, but this will not occur until after Sentence (17), and at the time of utterance, Sentence (16) suggests that the onus is on the passengers.

Sentence (17) – 'Thank you for your attention' – is another performative – I hereby thank you (Thomas 1995:33) but the final Sentence (18) is what Thomas describes (ibid.: 36) as a 'ritual

performative'. It depends on felicity conditions that are outside the speaker's control – in this case the aircraft may develop a fault that will lead to the flight's cancellation; the flight may be diverted; the addressee may have a dread of flying; or any other circumstance may invalidate the speaker's hope.

After take-off

(19) May I have your attention please.

(20) You may now unfasten your seat belts and recline your seats if you wish.

(21) Toilets are located at the rear of the aircraft.

(22) You are reminded that there is no smoking.

(23) Thank you.

Sentence (19), unlike Sentence (15), is a clear macro-marker and a summons. The aircraft has taken off, it has reached a certain altitude and there has been silence for several minutes, so this utterance clearly indicates new information. This comes in Sentence (20), which is a permission (Levinson 1983:277), as indicated by the use of 'may' and 'if you wish', and which releases the addressees from the instructions given in Sentence (16). Sentence (21) carries the implicature (Green 1989) that passengers may also go to the toilet if they wish – again there is an illocutionary force which may have a perlocutionary effect.

Sentence (22) repeats the prohibition on smoking from Sentence (14), but the prohibition is expressed as a negated nominalization to give the flight attendant distance. 'Thank you' (Sentence (23)) falls into the category described by Verschueren (1979:6) as 'Speech Act Formulae'. These are explained by Mey (2001:109) as

verbal expressions that in all respects behave like speech act verbs, except they are not regular verbs, but rather, stylistic or other variations on a common semantic theme.

Hence, Thank you (from the Austin performative I (hereby) thank you).

Before landing

(24) Ladies and gentlemen, we shall shortly be landing at …

(25) Will you please ensure that your seat back is upright with the arms lowered and that your seat belt is fastened.

(26) Thank you.

By this stage in the flight, the formulaic nature of the routine briefings has become clear. This section, as before, begins with the summons 'Ladies and gentlemen' serving as a macro-marker for the information in Sentence (24). The inclusive 'we' refers back to Sentence (3), with the implication that the flight has been a joint enterprise. Sentence (25) repeats Sentence (16) with the single substitution of 'will' for 'would'. Prescriptivist followers of notional-functional EFL teaching may object that Van Ek and Alexander (1975) use 'will' for enquiring whether an offer or invitation is accepted or declined, while 'would' is used when inviting others to do something, but I doubt if the difference between Sentences (16) and (25) is significant. Both sentences are polite requests; imperatives performed with redress, and Sentence (26) is, again, a speech act formula.

After landing

(27) Ladies and gentlemen, for your own safety please remain seated until the aircraft has come to a complete stop and the seat belt sign has been switched off.

(28) Before leaving the aircraft, please ensure that you have all items of hand luggage with you.

(29) Thank you.

Once again, the summons of 'Ladies and gentlemen' acts as a macro-marker to introduce new information. The inclusive 'your own safety' is used with the redressive action 'please' to instruct the passengers when they can move. In this case, they will literally receive a signal when it is safe to move, and the implicature is that they are to watch for this signal – 'the seat belt sign has been switched off'. The adjunct of time that introduces Sentence (28) is significant because it carries the implicature that it may be difficult to return to the aircraft for forgotten hand luggage. The speech act formula 'Thank you' (Sentence (29)) effectively closes down communication.

This section is interesting because of the reference to the seat belt sign. There has been no previous reference to this, and it can only be assumed that RAFO work on the basis that their passengers can identify and interpret signs – as in the use of 'remind' (Sentence (14)), which draws attention to the prohibition on smoking. On commercial airlines, by contrast, the seat belt signs are explained, the reading light switches are shown and the cabin call-buttons are demonstrated. Similarly, at the end of a commercial flight, it is usual for passengers to receive thanks for flying with that carrier, information about clearance procedures at the airport, and sometimes information about hotels and an expression of the airline's hope to be of service in the future. This is entirely absent from the RAFO briefing.

Conclusions

From this analysis it is possible to see how the RAFO routine briefing satisfies the criteria for 'mixed register', if we accept Halliday's (1988:162) statement that register 'can be summarized in terms of field, tenor and mode'.

So far as field is concerned – 'as regards what is actually taking place' – (Halliday 1978), the routine briefings provide essential safety information for passengers, but dispense with the 'customer care' aspects of in-flight control. They maintain a balance between an inclusive 'we', when everyone on board is concerned, and 'you' when only the passengers are affected. Passengers are informed when it is safe for them to move around the aircraft, they are reminded to take their belongings with them on disembarking, but the basic service provided on RAFO flights means that cabin crew do not have to request cooperation from passengers when serving food, selling duty-free goods or providing in-flight entertainment, so much of the language aimed at flattering customers (Fairclough 1988) is omitted.

In terms of tenor – 'who is taking part' – the message is conveyed by an expert; a fully trained, uniformed member of 4 Squadron, to addressees who are unlikely to have undergone similar specialist training. Though frequently eminent in their own areas of military specialisation, the addressees are aware that, in this instance, the flight attendant speaks with authority, and the military hierarchy ensures that the cabin crew receive a respectful hearing. Again, this contrasts with commercial airlines, where cabin crew may be seen as little more than dispensers of food and drink, and the safety briefings are routinely, and ostentatiously, ignored.

As regards the mode – 'what part the language is playing' –, the mixture is self-evident. The flight briefing is written language designed to be read aloud, and the paralinguistic gloss at the 'safety briefing' is designed to transmit safety information that may or may not be known to the addressees. The routine briefing is the most concise method of

doing this, but passengers have the option of referring to the safety leaflet for written reinforcement of what they have been told.

Villa A-3
Aziziya Garden Village
P.O. Box 98
Dhahran 31932
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Note

1. Compare that in the Christian marriage service there is a direct injunction to 'speak now' if anything is wrong.

References

Austin, J.L. 1962. How to do things with words. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bhatia, Vijay J. 1993. Analysing Genre; Language Use in Professional Settings. London: Longman.

Brown, Penelope & Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Candlin, Christopher N. & Yon Masley. 1995. Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity in the Discourse of Alternative Discourse Resolution. Working Papers 1. Sydney, Centre for Language in Social Life, Macquarie University.

Chaudron, Craig & J. Richards. 1986. The effect of discourse markers on the comprehension of lectures. Applied Linguistics 7(2).113-127.

Crystal, David & Derek Davy. 1969. Investigating English Style. Harlow: Longman.

Fairclough, Norman. 1988. Register, power and socio-semantic change. In: D. Birch & M. O'Toole (eds.), Functions of Style. London: Pinter Press, pp. 111-125.

Fairclough, Norman. 1989. Language and Power. London: Longman.

Ghadessy, Mohsin (ed.). 1988. Registers of Written English: Situational Factors and Linguistic Features. London: Pinter Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1971. Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order. New York: Basic Books.

Green, Georgia. 1989. Pragmatics and Natural Language Understanding. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Halliday, M.A.K. 1978. Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning. London: Edward Arnold.

Halliday, M.A.K. 1988. On the language of physical science. In: Mohsin Ghadessy (ed.), 1988.162-78.

Halliday, M.A.K. & R. Hasan. 1985. Language, Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a Socio-Semiotic Perspective. Victoria: Deakin University Press.

Holdcroft, David. 1978. Words and Deeds: Problems in the Theory of Speech Acts. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Levinson, Stephen C. 1983. Pragmatics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mey, Jacob L. 2001. Pragmatics: An Introduction. Oxford: Blackwell (2d ed.).

Schank, Roger C. & Robert P. Abelson. 1977. Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Swales, J. 1990. Genre Analysis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thomas, Jenny. 1995. Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics. London: Longman.

Van Ek, J.A. & L.G. Alexander. 1975. Threshold Level English. Oxford: Pergamon Press for the Council of Europe.

Verschueren, Jef. 1979. What People Say They Do with Words. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Berkeley: University of California.