THE USE OF VERBS IN BUSINESS E-MAIL COMMUNICATION – A PRAGMALINGUISTIC CORPUS STUDY

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Abstract: Corpus analyses conducted with the help of special tools have become more widely used in all areas of linguistics, including discourse analysis, genre analysis and pragmatics. The paper presents a pragmalinguistic research study of verbs, carried out on a specialized corpus of authentic correspondence of (chains of) Slovene business e-mails, *Posle-pis.* The corpus tools Oxford Wordsmith Tools 5.0 and Sketch Engine were used for analysis, and the research was followed by a comparison of language use with two Slovene reference corpora *FidaPLUS* and *Gigafida.* The study confirms the hypothesis that business discourse via e-mail has inherent characteristics that are shown through the frequency of use of certain verbs and verb forms. Certain forms were also identified which prove the conventionalized language use of business e-mail discourse.

Key words: verb, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, pragmatics, e-mail

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past fifteen years e-mail has become a part of everyday life both in the workplace and at home. It is the most commonly used electronic and computer-mediated communication tool, maintaining its role even during the massive increase in the use of social networks. Despite the fact that its rapid growth has decreased in recent years due to the many newly developed communication tools (Skype, social networks, Twitter, Viber, etc.), the number of email users and of e-mails sent is still growing. According to recent data by the Radicati agency (Radicati, 2013), in 2013 183 billion emails were sent every day worldwide.

Since its inception in the 1970s e-mail communication has had a powerful impact, with new patterns of communication developing and to some extent also becoming conventionalized. However, research into e-mail communication began only in the late 20th and early 21st century (Baron, 1998, 2002; Crystal, 2001; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000; Kranjc, 2003, 2004; Mallon – Oppenheim, 2002; Nidorfer Šiškovič, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Rice, 1997). Research has mainly been based on small specialized corpora of e-mails exploring new ways of communication between interactants and detecting changes according to different language use. They have

mainly focused on the stylistic characteristics of business e-mail letters, comparing them with traditional business letters printed on paper and sent via regular post. However, some recent articles (cf. Bhatia, 2005; Louhiala-Salminen – Kankaanranta, 2005; Yli-Jokipii, 2005; Gimenez, 2005; Swales 2004) are more devoted to the identification of new discourses in electronically mediated communication, as they emerge in globalized businesses and in international and multicultural organizations, with the emphasis on English as a lingua franca. In a survey carried out for this research, the focus was on the discourse of e-mail letters in Slovene, and especially the use of verbs. Analysis was carried out into whether the choice of verbs shows recognizable patterns either in the use of specific types of verbs or verb forms and related phrases that can be recognized according to their frequency of occurrence as part of conventionalized use in the discourse of business e-mails. The pragmatic categories of the used verbs were studied by using a specialized corpus of 300 business e-mails built for the purpose of the research. A quantitative and qualitative analysis corpus approach was used. Corpus tools facilitated analysis of large amounts of authentic language material, followed by an interpretation of the data.

2 INTERACTION AND THE DISCOURSE OF E-MAIL COMMUNICATION

One of the most characteristic features of electronically-mediated communication is interactivity. Interactants exchange messages for work purposes and quite often there are a number of exchanges per day. Thus we can talk about dialogic discourse between at least two, but often more interactants, due to the simple use of functions enabled by e-mail programmes to send the same e-mail message as carbon copies or blind carbon copies to multiple recipients. Business discourse arising from the exchange of electronic messages in a chain of e-mails between two or more interactants has the features of both written text and of multimodality, enabled and encouraged by the software: adding links and attachments with different visual and aural texts of different formats to the message. The main characteristics of this type of communication are speed and ease of transmission, and at the same time a decrease of the importance of grammatically correct writing, allowing typographical errors and mistakes at all linguistic levels, while increasing the significance of added items by which emotions are shown, and elements of spoken language. A result of the complexity of multimodal communication enabled by electronically-mediated communication is that it requires a different, more complex and integrated methodological research approach.

3 CORPUS APPROACH IN LINGUISTICS

A corpus approach has established itself in all areas of linguistics, i.e. using sets of real world texts to obtain data on language use, and at the same time as a methodological approach to research. Research based on the systematic collection of materials, i.e. authentic examples of language use, began to be used more intensively

in the 1960s (Biber – Finegan, 1991; Gorjanc – Fišer, 2010, p. 16). An important factor was the intensive development of computer science and information technology. Electronic database records replaced the paper format and there were many special tools developed which enable complex statistical analyses of large amounts of data. A corpus is now defined as a computerized database of texts or parts of texts collected according to the same criteria for various purposes, but mainly linguistic research (Atkins et al, 1992, p. 1). At first, corpora were used in linguistics for research in lexicology as a basis for creating new dictionaries (Gorjanc, 2005; Gantar, 2007) and descriptive grammars of languages (Biber et al, 1999; Cvrček, 2010). After 1995, however, corpus research was extended to discourse analysis and pragmatics, and the first corpora of spoken communication were built. Corpus linguistics, by using specific tools from the corpus of texts, obtains information about language patterns. Analysing the frequency of occurrence and concordances offers insights into the characteristics of texts and language use (see also Sinclair, 2004; Adolphs, 2008). This allows researchers to provide an accurate description that leads to a deeper understanding of the relationship between recurrent linguistic forms and their function in discourse (Adolphs, 2008, p. 8). The quantitative processing and the data it provides serve as a firm basis for further in-depth qualitative linguistic analyses and interpretation.

3.1 Reference corpora for Slovene

The first comprehensive new generation reference corpus for Slovene, *FidaPLUS*, was built in 2006. It was made available to the public and comprised of texts from a variety of sources and fields, containing 621 million words. In 2011, a more extensive reference corpus of Slovene, *Gigafida* was built, which incorporated most of the *FidaPLUS* corpus among its 1,200 million words, as well as the corpus of spoken texts *GOS*. A particularly accessible part of the corpus is its most balanced subcorpus *Kres*. *Gigafida* facilitates modern linguistic research and contrastive studies of Slovene language use. In addition to these corpora, there is *Nova beseda*, built by the Slovene Academy of Science and Art, which includes 318 million words, but includes less differentiated texts genres and media. One advantage of carrying out the research with the reference corpora *FidaPLUS* and *Gigafida* is that they are included in the corpus tool Sketch Engine. Thus, in addition to basic analysis, such as the production of its wordlist, concordances and keywords can be displayed, and a verbal sketch or thesaurus can be produced. For these reasons, in addition to the special corpus *Poslepis,* the corpora *FidaPLUS* and *Gigafida* were used in this survey as a reference.

4 PRAGMALINGUISTIC RESEARCH

4.1 Pragmalinguistic context

„Pragmatics explores the semantic functions of language in actual use as a complex form of behaviour that forms the meaning (...) Significance, which is the

main subject of a pragmatic research, is not a stable partner of linguistic form, but it is dynamically formed in the process of language use" (Verschueren, 2000, p. 26) „(…) or in institutionalized types of conversation (...) with a specific structure" (ibid., p. 61). The overall focus of the studies of linguistic pragmatics is therefore „the understanding of language meaning as a dynamic process, which operates in the relationship between context and structure with varying degrees of exit/variation" (ibid., p. 107). For this reason pragmatics should explore a range of meanings arising from the contextual nature embedded in speech as action, forming implicit meaning: whether there is the inability of complete explicitness, conventional language resources or strategies for the exploitation of impossibility in the formation of interest (ibid., p. 46).

In this research study the pragmatic perspective was used as a basis when designing the process and also later in the interpretation of data from the corpus analysis. Pragmatics studies the products of language use (Verschueren, 2000, p. 15), and the functioning of language in real contexts of use (ibid., p. 24). The starting point is to examine the meaning of the words of which a certain utterance or speech act consists, but also taking into account the context and the circumstances that characterize the words and utterances with additional, more or less explicit or implicit meanings. There are full texts included in the corpus, and texts are examples of authentic language use. Speech act theory has marked the methodology of pragmatic research by its explanations of procedures and conditions, the use of language, and possible situations and contexts that affect the illocutionary force. Pragmatics identifies whether a particular speech act performed by an interactant is an invitation, a request or an apology, and is (also) interpreted as an invitation, request or apology by the recipient. Nevertheless, Svenja Adolphs (2008, p. 7) observes that many presented cases did not account for authentic language use, but that researchers rather gained their data formed specifically for the purpose of their research, for example through questionnaires, completed forms, interviews, focused on a particular speech act. With the corpus approach the focus of research is placed elsewhere: the corpus of texts of authentic language ensures that the approach to the exploration of a single act is extended by taking into account a larger amount of text, and also that there are various quantitative data on the corpus that offer a wider view into the language use. By comparing the quantitative and qualitative analyses, findings can be synthesized and connected to the broader context of the business environment and the characteristics of business communication, or to examine a specific research question.

In addition to the already mentioned features, the analysis takes into account the factors of business communication. It is identified as formal communication, and the form of electronic business letters must be taken into account by the interactants. Moreover, business communication is a highly targeted activity, and therefore the language use is subordinated to the achievement of the business purpose, as well as

to the achievement of the objectives of the organization that a participant in the discourse represents. The need for directness which ensures that the addressee has clearly understood the message, and the need to be polite at the same time are united in business discourse. Both have been recognized in pragmatic studies of language use in business letters and correspondence in Slovene (e.g. Kalin Golob, 2003). Both issues will be addressed in connection with the use of verbs in speech acts.

4.2   The corpus *Posle-pis*

Corpus based research of e-mail business discourse in Slovene was carried out on the specialized corpus *Posle-pis* (Nidorfer Šiškovič, 2011). Specialized corpora are different from reference corpora of a specific language in that they are of lesser scope, are focused on a specific area of research, and are designed and built for a specific purpose or research question.

In this case, a specialized corpus of emails was built, i.e. dialogic discourse of business communication by e-mail when participants in communication perform work. Email messages are exchanged by two or more interactants and so in the analysis a chain of emails that were exchanged by two or more interactants on a particular theme was taken as a unit rather than individual email messages. The corpus consists of 300 exchanged emails in 43 chains. These are messages sent to a known addressee or addressees, not messages to be sent to a wider public or as part of mass mailings. Moreover, the messages represent business rather than social discourse and are expected to follow certain rules of behaviour, called netiquette. There were a total of 67 different participants, 42 female and 25 male. Regarding their fields of work they came from companies (25 subjects), non-commercial organizations, i.e. state administration, education, health care and associations (29 subjects) and individuals (13 subjects).

E-mail chains in the corpus *Posle-pis* consist of 3 to 19 business emails, with the average chain length being 7 emails. At the beginning of the chain there is in most cases a longer first e-letter, in which the participant introduces a certain topic, adding explanations and descriptions to support the main topic and the participants' communication purpose, and the chain ends with the message in which usually the realization of the purpose is expressed. The basic corpus data are that it comprises of 18,763 tokens, of 4,599 types.

4.3   Corpus analysis

For the purposes of the research, the data from corpora *FidaPLUS*, *Gigafida* and *Posle-pis* were first analysed with corpus tools, then different qualitative methods were used for further analysis of the data, followed by interpretation. Oxford Wordsmith Tool 5.0[1] (1996, 2007; Scott, 2008) is one of the most widely

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[1] Oxford Wordsmith Tool 5.0 was created in 1996, in the research version 5.0 from the year 2007 was used.

used corpus analysis tools as it enables many types of data processing and searching. It is adapted to work with large corpora, but it also supports the searching of differently labelled texts. It allows users to create frequency wordlists and concordances, it counts word phrases and collocations, and supports the calculation of keywords. It accepts text files (txt), as well as pdf and doc file formats, using filters. To a certain extent it can be used free of charge. Sketch Engine was also used: a tool that allows more complex corpora searches. Among the corpora of different languages, Slovene reference corpora are also included, i.e. *FidaPLUS* (Krek – Kilgarriff, 2006) and, from 2013, *Gigafida*. With the help of this tool a thesaurus can be produced by analysis of similarity of context, and word sketches produced by using ready-made typical syntactic patterns for Slovene. In order to achieve adequate analysis the corpora must be labelled and morphosyntactically marked and lemmatized, i.e. each token is attributed with the basic form of the word. The corpus analysis of Slavic languages, such as Slovene, Slovak and Serbian, is a more difficult task due to their inflectional richness, which is a lot higher than in English. Therefore, there are specific tools, such as morphosyntactic markers and lemmatizers, developed for such languages. For Slovene there is an online service JOS ToTaLe, into which the corpus *Posle-pis* was fed and processed as a UTF-8 character set text. The prepared text was then transferred into the Sketch Engine tool.

4.4   Research into verb use

Verbs are parts of speech used to describe an action, state, occurrence or perception. Pragmatics sees verbs as the centre of a speech acts. The semantic base of a speech act is a proposition, which is „a linguistic translation of an event, action, act, state, or activity in the verbal frame of meaning or an utterance. The main part of the event is expressed by a verb" (Kunst Gnamuš, 1984). A certain proposition can be used to form different utterances according to the communication purpose we wish to express.

The corpus research on *Posle-pis* corpus was conducted in three phases, in which the goals of the research and its methods were connected:
- by creating a list of the most common words, it was established which verbs were most commonly used by the email authors;
- by creating the list of concordances[2] of the most common verbs from the *Posle-pis* corpus, the characteristics of their environment and their pragmatic force were investigated;
- the results were compared with the concordances of the same verbs from the Slovene reference corpora *FidaPLUS* and *Gigafida*, to research linguistic use and potentially conventionalized forms.

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[2] A concordance is a word or phrase with its immediate context.

4.4.1 Lists of the most frequently used verbs

The Sketch Engine tool was used to produce a wordlist of the Slovene reference corpus *FidaPLUS*; then WordSmith Tools 5.0 was used to produce a wordlist of the *Posle-pis* corpus. There were 132 words on the list that occurred in more than ten email chains out of the 43 chains of the corpus. To compare the results of both corpora, we also used the first, i.e. the 132 most frequently used words from the *FidaPLUS* wordlist. The wordlists of both corpora showed that the most common verbs that were included in the list were the following (written in infinitive forms):
- the *Posle-pis* corpus: *prositi* (to ask), *poslati* (to send), *imeti* (to have), *sporočiti* (to inform), *zanimati* (to be interested in), *iti* (to go);
- the *FidaPLUS* corpus: *imeti* (to have), *iti* (to go).

The result shows that in both corpora there are only two verbs very high in the wordlist, i.e. *imeti* (to have) and *iti* (to go). Such an outcome of the quantitative research may be explained by the fact that both verbs are among the most basic and commonly used verbs, not only in Slovene, but also in most other languages. The verbs that top the wordlist of the *Posle-pis* corpus are also the following: *prositi* (to ask), *poslati* (to send), *sporočiti* (to inform) and *zanimati* (to be interested in).

The list of verbs shows that they are closely connected with the discourse of email communication, and its interactive form, i.e. chains of emails: authors very often ask (*prosijo*) for some data, services, goods; they have (*imajo*) information, answers, goods; they send (*pošiljajo*) information, attachments, translations, articles; they inform about (*sporočajo*) something or make an enquiry about something with the phrase 'I am interested in' (*zanima me*). The subjects in the corpus used these verbs very often, i.e. in more than 10 chains, in the following forms:
- *prositi* (to ask): *prosim* (56 occurrences in 29 chains);
- *poslati* (to send): *pošiljam* (31 occurrences in 22 chains); *pošljem* (21 occurrences in 15 chains);
- *imeti* (to have): *imam* (22 occurrences in 12 chains); *imamo* (21 occurrences in 13 chains);
- *sporočiti* (to inform): *sporočite* (22 occurrences in 13 chains); 13 occurrences: *prosim, (da mi) sporočite*;
- *zanimati* (to be interested in): *zanima* (21 occurrences in 15 chains); 15 occurrences *zanima me*;
- *iti* (to go): *gre* (14 occurrences in 12 chains).

The first number in brackets shows all the examples in the emails, the second shows the number of chains in which examples were used. The most used verb is 'ask' (*prositi*) in the 1st person singular form *prosim*: it was used 56 times in 29 different chains (there were 43 chains altogether). The high rate of usage of this form confirms the focus of business discourse – to get to the point as directly as possible,

i.e. to get information, an answer, service, goods etc., with the use if direct form of request and word 'please' (*prosim*) as an interjection.

The next important finding was that participants used verbs not in impersonal forms and the passive voice, which has always been considered in Slovene to be a neutral business and more formal form, but in personal forms, mostly the 1st person singular of the verbs 'ask' (*prosim*), 'send' *pošiljam, pošljem*; 'I ask you to inform me' (*prosim, da mi sporočite*); 'I am interested in' (*zanima me*). As for the verb 'have' (*imeti*), there was almost equally frequent use of the 1st person singular *imam* (22 occurrences in 12 chains) and the 1st person plural *imamo* (21 occurrences in 13 chains). The use of the plural form is explainable by the business context and the fact that participants identify themselves as representatives of and part of an organization, association or company regarding themselves as 'us': for example, *izdelek imamo na zalogi* (we have the product in stock).

A single form which was found in the 3rd person singular was the verb form *gre* (14 examples in 12 chains); it was used three times with the meaning 'to move, to go', e. g. *potem gre v lekturo* (then it goes to be proofread); *gre v ponedeljek tudi na Madžarsko* (he is going to Hungary on Monday) and *na porodniško gre 2. aprila* (she is going on maternity leave on the 2nd of April). In most cases (9) it was used in the meaning of speaking about something, e. g. *Gre za povsem novo podobo* (It is about a completely new image); *Ja, gre za isto zadevo* (Yes, it is about the same matter) etc.

4.4.2 A comparison of data in the corpora *Posle-pis*, *FidaPLUS* in *Gigafida*

The findings of the research into verb use in the corpus *Posle-pis* was compared with a reference corpus for the Slovene language *FidaPLUS*, and later also with the more extensive reference corpus of Slovene *Gigafida*. The comparison between the corpora *Posle-pis* and *FidaPLUS* showed a significant difference in the use of personal and impersonal verb forms. In *Posle-pis* the most used forms of the verb *imeti* (to have) were the 1st person singular *imam* (22 occurrences) and the 1st person plural *imamo* (21 occurrences); however, in *FidaPLUS* the most frequently used forms were the 3rd person singular and plural *ima*, *imajo*. In both corpora, the verb *iti* (go) was used mainly in the 3rd person singular (*gre*). The results confirmed the interactive nature of email communication, and the more personal approach due to the use of the 1st person singular. The latter can be explained by the fact that participants seek closeness, as in spoken communication and business communication.

The analysis of the data on verb use in the reference corpus *Gigafida* showed that the most frequent of the used verbs was *imeti* (to have): there were 4,295,288 concordances of all the verb forms. The second was the verb *iti* (to go) with 1,472,025 concordances. The same order of verb frequency was shown by analysis of the *FidaPLUS* wordlist. The concordance list of the verb *prositi* (to ask) from

the corpus *Gigafida* showed 162,267 verbs in different verb forms, but the most frequent form of the verb or the interjection was *prosim* (I ask/please) with 70,765 cases, and it represented a high percentage, i.e. 43.6 percent of all concordances. The rest of the verbs in *Gigafida* were used with the following frequencies: *sporočiti* (to inform) in all the verb forms in 143,867 concordances, which is the least frequent among the studied verbs, all the forms of the verb *zanimati* (to be interested in) in 213,095 concordances, and the verb *poslati* (to send) in all forms 259,864 concordances. The proportions among the verbs indicate that the verb *sporočiti* (to inform) is used more often in specific situations, and the verb *zanimati* (to be interested in) and *sporočiti* (to inform) are used more widely and are part of general discourse.

4.4.3 The phrase *prosim, sporočite* (please, inform)

The use of the phrase *prosim, sporočite* (please, inform) was examined in the *Gigafida* corpus, as the results from the *Posle-pis* corpus showed a large frequency of use (13 occurrences out of 22 with the verb *sporočite*). The frequency in the reference corpus showed only 38 concordances, so the use is rare in general Slovene, but the result also proves that the phrase is a characteristic of business emails. The study of the co-text of all the 38 concordances from *Gigafida* showed that the tokens were from the following areas: internet (20 tokens), literature (1), magazines (11) and newspapers (6). The phrase was in all cases used by participants in spoken genres, e. g. a conversation in the pilot's cabin, or in computer mediated genres where the speakers write to readers or web page users, in interactive texts, such as reader's questions, invitations or instructions to magazine readers. The single example that came from literary genres emerged in direct speech. The corpus data shows that the linguistic use of the phrase is a characteristic of email discourse, as part of its interactive elements. Further, it can be stated that the phrase has become a conventionalized form of business email discourse. In the imperative form *sporočite* (inform) it represents a speech act in the form of a direct request and it is always used with the verb *prositi* or the interjection *prosim* (please) in the 1st person singular (the form in the 1st person plural *prosimo, sporočite* appears in the *Gigafida* corpus only 7 times). The latter is used in the form of an interjection with the pragmatic force of mitigation of the request and at the same time an expression of politeness. This form of the request is direct and at the same time also polite, so it is often used in business discourse.

4.4.4 Concordance of the verb *zanima* (to be interested in)

The list of concordances of the verb *zanima* (figure 1) from *Posle-pis* showed some specific characteristics: beside the verb form *zanima* there was in most of the examples (15 out of 21) the 1st person singular form of the reflexive pronoun: *zanima me* (I am interested in).
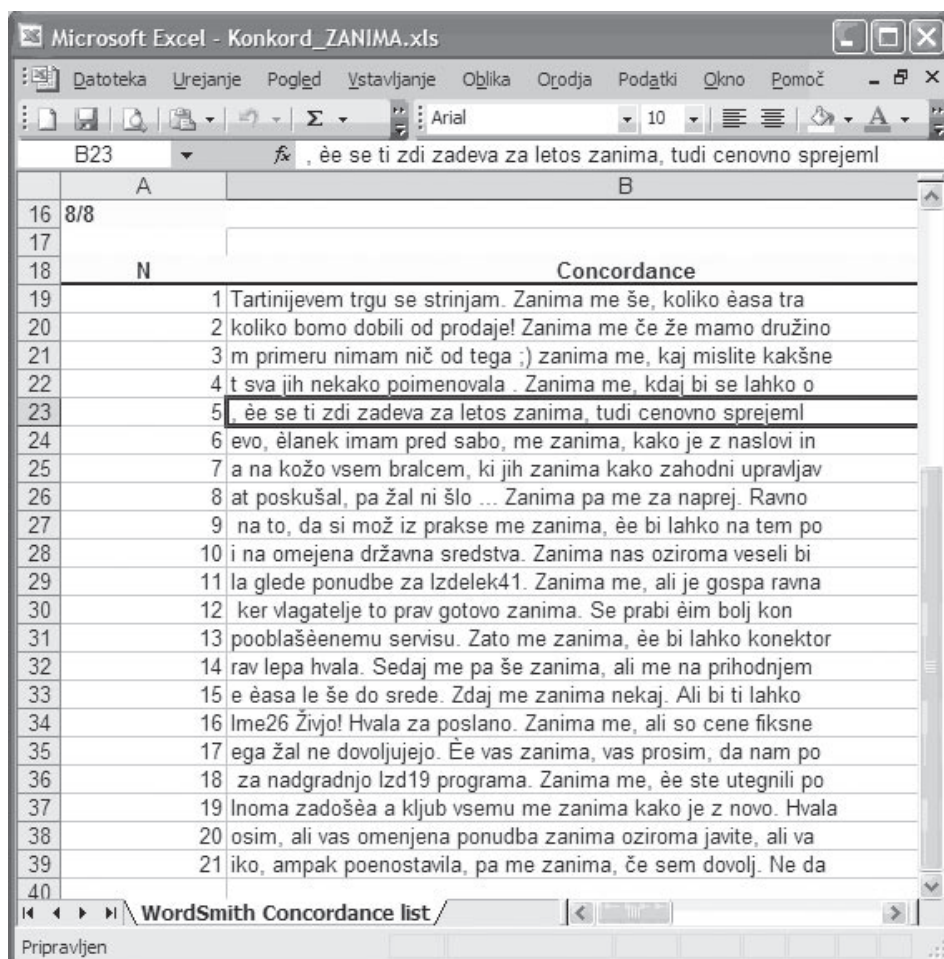
Figure 1: Concordances for the token *zanima*

The result is comparable with other verbs in the 1st person singular, and at the same time it shows that specifically the use of the phrase *zanima me* is of high frequency. It can thus be assumed that it is a conventionalized form used by participants to enquire for information. In Figure 1 there is also an example of noise (the 5th concordance) in the corpus, which may have a significant influence on the results and findings. The corpus tool included the example of the text in the concordance list because there was a spelling mistake made by the participant (instead of *zanimiva* he or she wrote *zanima*). It was therefore necessary to correct the results and leave out the token. In contrast with *Posle-pis,* from *Gigafida* a list of concordances included 117,737 occurrences, most of them of direct speech from spoken texts. Among them,

there were 28,298 concordances for the 1st singular person form *zanima me* (I am intersted in). If we compare the concordances of both corpora, the results again show that the share of the studied phrase is larger in the *Posle-pis* corpus, which also confirms the hypothesis that its use is characteristic of business emails.

5 CONCLUSION

In the article the results are given of a pragmalinguistic study of verbs and their most frequently used forms in business email communication in Slovene. The analysis was carried out on the specialized corpus *Posle-pis*, built for the purposes of the research, which consists of 300 authentic emails in 43 chains. Wordlists were produced using the corpus tools Wordsmith Tools 5.0 and Sketch Engine of the most frequently used words in the corpus *Posle-pis* and the Slovene reference corpus *FidaPLUS*; comparative analysis was also carried out with the largest reference corpus for the Slovene language, *Gigafida*. The results showed that the studied genre of business discourse, i.e. email communication, has recognizable characteristics by which it can be differentiated from general linguistic use. The list of the most frequently used verbs also confirmed that email communication is an interactive discourse in which the participants in most cases use the 1st person singular or the 1st person plural verb forms. There was high frequency of specific verbs: *prosim* (the verb to ask, also used in the 1st person singular or plural as an interjection), *pošiljam* (to send), *sporočite* (to inform), *zanima* (to be interested in). Corpus research confirmed the hypothesis that some manifestations of linguistic use in business email discourse are conventionalized. Most of these were taken from spoken communication, as indicated by the studied co-text. Other research has shown that such transfers are quite common in email discourse. An example of a conventionalized form is a polite expression of request involving the phrase *zanima me* (I am interested in) or *prosim, da mi sporočite* (please, inform me).

With the continuation of research into individual speech acts other specifics of email discourse might also be identified, as well as the rhetorical strategies of the business email communication participants. Moreover, it would also be interesting to carry out plurilingual research into business email discourse, and compare the linguistic use in different languages, to either confirm or negate assumptions that in recent years language-specific linguistic patterns have become a lot more common, in comparison to the Anglo-Saxon practises that predominated globally in the early years of email use.

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