

A Study on the Characteristics and Writing Principles of Business Correspondence

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Abstract—Business correspondence is a written communication in the trade between the two sides. During the exchanges of business correspondence, the view of the two sides is to be expressed and communicated as well as ideas and information. Therefore, an effective exchange of business correspondence can help domestic manufacturers and foreign customers establish or maintain a long-term friendly relationship. Undoubtedly, it is particularly important to learn how to write a successful business correspondence. However, just copying theoretical principles from the text is not enough. This paper takes “3C” principles, a standard of a good business correspondence generally accepted in academic field and British linguist G.N. Leech’s famous politeness principles as a theoretical background, analyzing the characteristics of the language used in BC, respectively in terms of its lexical characteristic and its structural characteristics in sentences. Then, in order to better grasp the key to write a successful business correspondence, some main writing principle like polite principle will be specifically analyzed.

Keywords—business correspondence; communication; characteristics; writing principles

I. INTRODUCTION

In today’s society, communication plays a pivotal role in daily life. Communication is what we human beings are born with. With the development of economic globalization, the exchanges of international trade have become increasingly frequent. As a result, business communication occupies an important position in the trade markets. Business communication is a process through which the parties involved establish partnerships or relationships, negotiate terms, strike deals, and complete transactions. New information technologies are increasingly used in business communication, yet written letters still represent the mainstay channel and medium. Business writing is an indispensable part of business, is used to sell products or services, sending information for all descriptions of utility, answer supplier or customer inquiries, execute daily operations, and maintain good public relations. Business correspondence, as one of the most important writing form, is widely used in business dealings. An effective business correspondence can help establish or maintain a long-term friendly relationship between domestic manufacturers and foreign customers. Therefore, in order to write a decent business correspondence, it is necessary to be aware of the importance and the basic principle for it. What’s more, it

should be effective to ensure that messages are accurately prepared and properly presented.

II. THE RELEVANT THEORIES

A. The “3C” Principles

The importance of BC in English has long been recognized, with English being the universal language for international trade and business. Many experts in business thus have done abundant research about successful BC and come into an agreement that a good BC follows the three Cs principles: Clarity, Conciseness and Courtesy.

Clarity means avoid ambiguity and confusion. In order to be informative, business writers must strive to write in a style that is clear and direct, eliminating any possibilities of misunderstanding. The words used should be simple and accurate while the sentences should be well constructed. Clarity has always been a pivotal element in writing business correspondence. Clarity includes the following requirements (Gao Jiayong, 2001):

- ◆ Choose short, familiar and conversational words or phrases instead of long, complicated and roundabout ones. Words that are commonly-used are easy to be understood.
- ◆ Construct effective sentences. Sentences that are simple and short are easy for the readers to read. The writer should try to cut a long sentence into several short sentences, which will not simplify the letter but make the letter easier to read.
- ◆ Organize ideas into a logical order. Knowing your receiver of this business correspondence and asking what is important to him. Making sure that every sentence resonates clearly with the message that you know what your receiver wants and you can deliver it. Then, knowing the action you want your receiver to take. Don’t “beat around the bush”, make it obvious that you would like to see a specific action occur as a result of what you have written.

Conciseness means using as few words as possible and concise sentences, with no sacrificing completeness, concreteness and courtesy, to express the meaning of a letter. Conciseness enables to save both the writer’s and the recipient’s time. However, it does not indicate that the short

the better but shortness with precise and straightforward expression. To achieve conciseness, try to use simple words and short sentences, avoid unnecessary repetition and wordy languages and confine each paragraph to only one topic. The following points should be remembered (Gao Jiayong, 2001):

- ◆ Try not to be wordy. Do not use phrases when a word can be used instead, unless it would change the meaning of the sentences.
- ◆ Remove cliché and unnecessary words. Try to avoid using cliché such as “allow me to say”, “in reply”, “I wish to state”, “please be advised”, “take the liberty”, “pertaining to” and so on.
- ◆ Avoid unnecessary repeat. Repeat the sentences only to show emphasis. The letter would be wordy and boring if repetition is too much for no good reason.

Courtesy plays a considerable role in business letter, as it helps to strengthen your business relationship and to establish new ones. In order to make a business letter courteous, the writer should avoid irritating, offensive or belittling statements and consider his or her need, problems and emotions. Normally, punctuality is stressed as an important aspect of courtesy in business correspondence. A prompt letter is always more valued than a delayed one.

B. Leech's Politeness Principle

Leech believes that everyone is consciously or unconsciously complying with some principles of language in his verbal communication. In 1967, the American philosopher and logician Paul Grice put forward the famous “Cooperative Principle” (CP). His idea is that “in making conversation, the participants must first of all willing to cooperate; otherwise, it would not be possible for them to carry on the talk” (Leech, 1983). It was based on Paul's theory that Leech raised a series of maxims as an explanation to illustrate how politeness operates in conversational activities in his book *Principle of Pragmatics*. According to Leech's view, there are six maxims that should be followed (Zheng Lin, 2004):

- ◆ Tact maxim: minimize cost to other and maximize benefit to other. This maxim is of paramount importance according to Leech.
- ◆ Generosity maxim: minimize benefit to self and maximize cost to self.
- ◆ Appreciation maxim: minimize dispraise of other and maximize praise of other.
- ◆ Modesty maxim: it goes conversely compared with appreciation maxim. minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self.
- ◆ Agreement maxim: minimize disagreement between self and other and maximize agreement between self and other
- ◆ Sympathy maxim: minimize antipathy between self and other and maximize sympathy between self and other.

The six maxims are helpful to the idea and expression structure of business correspondence writing. It can combine the polite formula with jargon, effectively conveying the information and finally promoting the successful operation of business. Nevertheless, what should be figured out is that in business correspondence writing, “the Politeness Principles” should not be used alone but to be used together with other criterion. In a word, it can not be neglected in business correspondence writing.

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE

A. Lexical Characteristics

Since BC is written for specific purpose and has its own special function, it has to conform to the “3C” principles. Therefore, BC owns its own characteristics in word choice which is different from other types of writing. What should be emphasized is that words selected in BC must be prudential, or it may ruin an opportunity for a successful transaction.

Formality in BC indicates the serious attitude, sincere wish, professional skills, good personalities and even good company image (Waston, 2004). What its function is that it give the receiver of the BC an impression of reliability, which will be the cornerstone of a successful transaction. For example, the use of “identify” instead of “think about”, “deliver” in stead of “send”, “inquiry” instead of “ask”, “in reply to” instead of “answer”, etc.

1) The formality of words used in BC

E.g.1 The products you demand fall within the scope of our business activities.

Here, “fall within the scope of ” institutes “within” to show more formality.

E.g.2 We have all the items in stock and are now making up the order.

Here, “make up ” is much more formal than “prepare”.

2) The Practicality of Words in BC

As BC is aiming to achieve a transaction, the words used must be practical and professional. Surely, the terms and phrases used are inevitably technical ones. This is what mostly differs BC from other types of writing. Adjective words or phrases does not occupy a pivotal place in BC writing. On the contrary, words with salient practicality are what BC truly need in writing.

E.g.1 Please quote us the items listed on the enclosed inquiry form, giving your prices C.I.F London.

E.g. 2 Our terms of payment are normally 30-day bill of exchange, documents against payment.

3) The Informative Business Connation of Words in BC

Polysemy is a common language phenomenon in English writing. Single-meaning words are very few. The higher the frequency of the word, the more meaning it has. As a consequence, the words have specific meaning under different circumstances. It goes the same with the words used in BC. Some words used in BC are no longer what the

original meaning are, but referring to specific business meanings. The following are some examples to show (Qi Yunfang, 1995):

E.g. 1 We are writing to you with a desire to open an account with you.

E.g. 2 This line is being manufactured continuously, but will only be available again in February.

As the above examples show, it can be easily figured out that the meanings of words vary much when used in BC. It is clearly to see that if the words used in BC do not discard its original meaning, the sentences seem to be strange that will leads to a serious mistake during the transaction.

B. The Structural Characteristics in Sentence

1) The Use of Fixed Expressions

Many sentences used in BC are a fixed set of expressions that are accustomed to be used. In this case, every time when we are in the same condition, the expressions just pop in our heads. The use of these fixed expressions not only save time but also indicates the writer's efficient skills. For instance, the expressions are very helpful when the following sentences are written at the beginning of letters:

Thank you for your letter of...

We are in receipt of your letter of ... And have noted with pleasure that you are interested in developing business with use in...

2) The Use of Noun -Structured Sentences

Compared with verb-structured sentences, noun-structured sentences are not only more abstract in meaning but also more formal in style. A same thing can be better and more concisely expressed by noun-structured sentences rather than verb-structured sentences. The following are some examples to be compared between the two (Wang Xingsun, 1998):

E.g. (1) The two parties satisfactorily agree with each other will be a cornerstone to develop business and cooperate further.

E.g. (2) The satisfactory agreement made by the two parties will be a cornerstone for the development of business and further cooperation. (better)

Here in the above example, "agree", "develop", "cooperate" are verbs that are transformed into nouns of "agreement", "development", and "cooperation" in the second version. Although expressing the same meaning, the second version conforms more to the writing style of BC.

3) The Use of Passive Sentences

Passive sentences, in fact, has a function to soften the tone and maintain the harmonious communicative atmosphere in the business dealing compared with using an initiative sentence, which may bear more personal feelings. Ashley, pointed out that except choosing some proper expressions in BC, one should use more passive sentences to enable the correspondence more polite because passive voice makes your requirement tender in her book *A*

Handbook of Commercial Correspondence (1992). The followings are some instances taken:

E.g.1 (1) We will postpone the shipment time if we do not receive your L/C in time.

E.g.1 (2) The time of shipment will be postponed if your L/C is not opened in time.(better)

From the two examples, the sentences written in passive form look more polite and friendly compared with those in initiative form. It cares more about others' feelings and show respect for the counterpart.

2.4 The Use of Conditional Sentences

Conditional sentence, when used for offering suggestions or asking more efforts from the counterpart, can not only reduce the failure of transaction behind the proposed suggestions, but also make the additional hopes more available which can be more probably acknowledged by the other party. Below are examples given to illustrate:

E.g.1 If the quality of your goods could meet our customers' satisfaction, we shall send further orders in the near future.

E.g.2 We will also be interested to know what benefits we are likely to get if consignments are to be covered at your end.

Conditional sentences make a decent space between the two parties and make things more available. The tone of conditional sentences is more soft and it will reduce conflict when one of the parties is trying to ask more requirements.

C. Writing Principles of Business Correspondence

1) "You Attitude" in Mind

"You attitude" in writing does not simply mean being polite with a large number of "Thank you". It actually means that the writers show appreciation and care for their reader. "You attitude" leads to courteous messages. Comparison are made as follows(Chang Yutian, 2006):

E.g.1 (1) We would like to cite two reasons for the price rise as follows.

E.g.1 (2) You are invited to note two reasons for the price rise.

The first version focuses on "our" point of view, which may or may not be readily acceptable to the reader. By changing the approach, the second version sounds more agreeable.

E.g.2 (1) We are in need of funds and that is why your overdue bill must be paid right away.

E.g.2 (2) To maintain your excellent credit reputation, please remit us your bill overdue.

The first version starts with "we", but readers are not really interested in "us", especially when satisfying "our" needs would mean that "they" have to do something unpleasant to "them". The second version is to achieve better and faster response reversing the perspective, and by highlighting something the other party is interested.

2) Attention for Tactful Strategies

Occasions like declining an order or making

complaints are a part of business life. When this happens, writers may have to write negative-news messages. As negative news often involves blaming the readers and is thus likely to offend them, business writers need to be considerate and adopt tactful means of writing such messages. Before exploring the proper ways, the following examples further the explanation.

Tactful one: Sometimes policy wording is a little hard to understand. I am glad to clear up these questions for you.

Blunt one: Obviously, if you had read your policy carefully, you'd be able to answer these questions yourself.

It is evidently that the second version is much more polite than the first one. Through the second one, the feeling of the reader will not be hurt and it is more acceptable for the reader to acknowledge the explanation for the delay. On the contrary, the first one will inevitably damage the other party's feeling and also destroy the potential cooperation in the future.

3) *Updating Terms*

We are living in an age where things change faster now than in any previous eras. This is a simple fact that defies elaboration. We have to watch closely drastic updates at home and major events in international markets. Cliches should be avoided. "Cliches" means a direct pass down from traditional writing in vogue in the upper class which are borrowed or transplanted into business writing. It may not be confusing, but it adds little importance other than a strange feeling of meeting some ancient scholars somewhere, of a sudden. We should try to get rid of any trite expressions and pet phrases.

Cliches are phrases and expressions that so many writers have used so often that cliches have lost whatever freshness they might give off when cliches were initially created. Any overused phrase can become a cliché. An example is illustrated below (Chang Yutian, 2006):

We have for acknowledgement your letter of July 5th and are appreciative of your information.

The expressions "have for acknowledgement" and "are appreciative of", are both out of date. Examined from another perspective, the first phrase enters on a noun coupled with a functional verb "have", and the second is an adjective phrase. However, neither is effective.

IV. CONCLUSION

From what have been explained above, it can be concluded that words used in BC are formal, practical, professional and informative. Sentences, on the other hand, are well structured, and mostly passive-structured to achieve a polite, formal and professional impression.

The principles for BC writing are to stylize the letter with the above characteristics. "You attitude" in mind goes first, followed by attention on tactful sentences. Besides, interrogative sentences could be used to save you from embarrassment when inevitably being negative. The last but not the least, the update terms could not be ignored with rapid development of business environment and society.

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