

Linguistic Analysis of Business Letters

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Abstract

Business letters are very important in daily business negotiation and communication. This paper aims to analyse them from two linguistic perspectives: vocabulary use and pragmatic politeness principle, in order to ensure the language quality of business letters and the smooth progress of business negotiation and transaction.

Keywords

Business Letters; Linguistic; Lexical Usage; Pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Business letters are formal or informal letters written to a reader, who is generally outside the company, with a specific purpose stated in a particular manner. The message is enhanced through its language and style so the reader's perception of the company's image and the writer's integrity is favourable. This kind of genre is of vital importance in daily business communication. This essay aims to analyse it with linguistic manners, in order to ensure the quality of business letters from the perspective of language, and the smooth progress of business negotiations and transactions. It will be illustrated in two main parts: lexical usage and politeness principles in pragmatics.

2. Lexical Usage

2.1. Lexical Features of Business Letters

2.1.1. Various Terminologies

Business letter is usually characterized by formality. In order to ensure the smooth development of trade activities, it contains a lot of terminologies, which can accurately convey the business intention, enhance mutual understanding and seek more business opportunities. Such as "authorization" "current" "enter into agreement", etc.

2.1.2. Precise Words

The words used in business letters are usually precise, and care should also be taken to prevent possible misunderstandings and ambiguities in language use in order to avoid possible disputes in the future. That's the reason why such a sentence is often added at the end of the letter: "please don't misunderstand the above remarks." Besides, various prepositions and function words are often used, and numbers must also be used rigorously. For example, all figures relating to the price must carry a currency symbol and retain two decimal digits.

2.1.3. Abbreviation

To save time and space, abbreviations that are known to both parties are widely used in business correspondence, such as GDP (Gross Domestic Product), IMF (International Monetary Fund) and so on, which could make business activities carried out efficiently. And with the development of digital technology and Internet, a number of new acronyms were born to serve e-commerce, like B2B (business to business), B2C (business to consumer), etc.

2.2. Usage of Lexical Chunks

2.2.1. Definition of Chunks

As a special language phenomenon between sentence and word, chunks are usually stored in people's brain as a whole. It's the smallest unit of communication. The theory Michael Lewis posed in 1993 believes that the core of language is a lexicon composed of various types of lexical chunks, and sentences are formed by different combinations of them. He created a new word "prefabricated plates" referring to lexical chunks, thinking that they combine the advantages of grammar, semantics and context, and have the ability of language self-generation.

2.2.2. Classification of Chunks

Lewis divides lexical chunks into four types in terms of structure and function:

Words and multi word vocabulary, which can be directly found in dictionaries;

High frequency collocations, also called fixed collocations, usually appear in business letters;

Institutionalized utterances, a set of phrases or proverbs formed in daily communication, are rarely used in business texts;

Sentence frames and heads are discontinuous structural phrases such as the one... and the other..., etc.

2.2.3. Significance of Chunks in Business Letters

Becker proposed that the basis of mastering a language is to understand chunks in the language so as to achieve fluency in language. The degree comes from the use of blocks of fixed words stored in their brains. Proper use of lexical blocks can improve idiomatic expression of the language accuracy, which is of vital importance in business letter writing. As mentioned above, business letters contain a large number of terminologies, abbreviations and relatively fixed procedural sets of sentences, which can be called "business English lexical chunks", with formal integrity, semantic agreement and structural stability. Although it has its own unique mode of writing and language expression, it's also an organic whole composed of a set of coherent sentences in logic, meaning and rhetoric. If we modularize and systematize the vocabulary involved in each link of business letter writing, we can better grasp the framework and ideas, and have the ability to quickly, professionally and accurately reply.

3. Politeness Principles in Business Letters

3.1. Definition of Politeness Principles

Politeness is the attitude of one party towards the other, which is called "self" and "others" respectively, and a "strategic criterion" comes from this. The core of this criterion is "benefit" and "cost", in other words, to minimize the damage to the listener, and at the same time to benefit the listener the most. In business letters, in order to maintain the negative face of both parties, it is necessary to express opinions indirectly as much as possible.

3.2. The Use of Euphemisms

3.2.1. Definition of Euphemisms

The use of euphemism is a common phenomenon in language, referring to using harmless or pleasant words instead of those direct and abrupt words to express demands or attitudes. Because of the polite principles in business letters, euphemism has surely become an important part of it in order to make the expression more implicit, polite and easy to accept. It's like the lubricant of language.

3.2.2. The Principles of Using Euphemisms

Magnanimous Principle: This is mainly used for instructions and promises, to make oneself the least benefit and the most cost. In other words, use humble language to lower your own status

or raise the status of others, so as to show your generosity and to achieve the purpose of trading. For example, “we regret that we failed to specify the time of delivery.” This sentence takes responsibility for the writer of the letter himself, which is very sincere and makes the other party feel comfortable.

Compassion Principle: This principle is to try to reduce one’s dislike of others and exaggerate one’s sympathy for others. If one party directly rejects the other’s requirements, it may be thought very haughty, so that interest in continuing reading your letter will be forfeit, not to mention cooperation. Therefore, appropriate words should be used in the letter to weaken the negative tone. Such as, “it seems to us that we have given the most favourable terms.” The structure “It seems to” is a tacit expression of displeasure, implying that if the other part doesn’t make a concession, the trading activities will not continue, which is easier to accept by the other side.

Agreement principle: This principle is mostly used in refusal letters. It requires both parties to reach consensus and reduce differences in the trade negotiations. For example, “we don’t deny that the quality of your products is excellent, but they are just not the style that we want at the moment.” In this letter, the writer doesn’t reject the other’s product directly, but first affirms the quality and then gives an explanation, thus laying the foundation for future cooperation.

3.3. Ambiguity Analysis--The Use of Hedge

3.3.1. Functions of Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a kind of elastic language usage, with indeterminate denotation and undefined connotation. Compared with precise language, it has more generality and flexibility. It improves the accuracy of language, shows the basic principles of politeness, and enhances the flexibility of language.

3.3.2. The Usage of Hedges

According to Lake off, hedges change according to the pragmatic functions and can be divided into two kinds: approximator and shields. The former are those expressions which can change the words, for instance: sort of, more or less, to some degree, etc. While the latter doesn’t change the words, form and structure of meaning, they just let the original sentence meaning more easing, like: I think, I am afraid, etc.

In business letters, we can analyse the usage of hedges in three dimensions: in the physical world, in the communicative world and in the psychological world.

The physical world refers to the real environment in which language selection takes place, including time, space and the position of both parties. It is often used in inquiry and response letters to explain the time of delivery, the date of payment, etc. “We intend to take delivery of the goods by ourselves, which is expected to arrive on June 16.” The shield “expected to” illustrates the ambiguity of time, in order to win a certain amount of control over the time for the writer, which can also express politeness and appropriation.

The communicative world includes the occasion, the environment, the culture, as well as the basic principles and requirements that regulate the behaviour of both parties. Specifically, it is to comply with the requirements of communicative etiquette and the basic norms of international trade. Even in the simplest sentence: “thank you very much” uses the approximator “very much”. It fully expresses the respect of the writer for the identity and status of the recipient and contributes to the long-term cooperation between the two parties.

In business letters, the language used by the writer is to some extent affected by psychological factors. Successful business communication can only be ensured when both motivations are mutually agreed on. The use of ambiguity can effectively prevent the emergence of incorrect expressions and better satisfy what the two parties think. For example, “Your delay will cause us a lot of inconvenience. We hope you can deliver the goods as soon as possible.” The

approximator “a lot of inconvenience” does not point out the exact details, but has the effect of complaint. “As soon as possible” expresses the demanding solution. The shield “we hope” relieves the tension at the same time, laying a foundation for future contacts.

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, linguistic art in business letters most importantly lies in precise and politeness. All the analysis in lexicology, semantics or pragmatics reflects these characteristics. It is the concrete manifestation of continuous language selection and adaptation. It is the language selection made by both parties with a purpose to comply with various intentions and to conform to different kinds of business communication rules and the laws of the objective world that effectively promotes smooth business communication between the two sides.

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