A Study on the Principle of Courtesy in Business English Correspondence from the Perception of Pragmatics

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Abstract: Business English correspondence plays a significant role in establishing business relationships, cross-cultural business communication and commercial transactions. In order to reach these goals through business English correspondence, writers from both parties always pay great attention to their expressions, recognizing courtesy as an essential principle in business English writing. Guided by Pragmatics, this paper analyzes the principle of courtesy in the context of business English correspondence from the perspective of words and sentences, aiming at summarizing the general rules and offering effective advice to business English correspondence writers.

Keywords: Courtesy, Business English Correspondence, Pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, economic globalization has promoted business exchange and communication among different countries worldwide. As one of the major languages widely used by people around the world, English largely dominates international interactions, due to its extensive influence and usage. In this context, business letters play a crucial role as key tools for communication, facilitating the exchange of information, establishing trade relationships, conducting business activities and negotiating contracts. Therefore, the quality of business English letters determines an organization's ability to expand its business and generate profits to some extent.

Compared with other types of writing, like novels, journals and essays, business English writing is in high demand and follows certain writing rules. In practice, seven principles are emphasized: completeness, concreteness, clarity, conciseness, courtesy, consideration and correction[1]. Except for "courtesy" and "consideration", the rest of the principles mainly focus on language expression which includes the choice of accurate words, correct usage of the business jargon and arrangement of sentence structures. In addition, "consideration" covers the psychological aspect, reflected typically by the usage of "you attitude"[2]. Among these principles, courtesy seems to be the most difficult to understand, as it is abstract and slightly different from the politeness we experience in everyday interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the use of the principle of courtesy in business English correspondence to achieve business goals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Principle of Courtesy

Numerous studies have analyzed the principle of courtesy in business English correspondence mainly from the psychological aspect. These studies emphasized the attitude of the writers, taking their roles in business relationships into consideration. They argued that writers should demonstrate likability through apology, approbation, generosity and modesty. By seeking agreement and conveying sympathy, writers can enhance their enthusiasm and friendliness, show humanism and avoid creating any sense of antipathy among readers. Thus, the principle of courtesy can facilitate the achievement of business goals. However, these approaches are still broad and abstract. Writers may struggle with demonstrating their generosity or determining the appropriate level of modesty. As a result, more precise guidelines for the usage of words and sentences are necessary.

The principle of courtesy in business English letters has also been extensively analyzed in existing studies based on the politeness principle itself. Geoffrey N. Leech, a British linguist, advocated that the two participants in communication should maximize the expression of polite beliefs and minimize the expression of impolite beliefs. Based on the idea, he proposed six maxims to demonstrate the manifestation of politeness, namely Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement and Sympathy[3]. Furthermore, Brown and Levinson's face-saving Theory (FST) has been widely applied in the strategy of courtesy in business English letters. Based on these theories, expressions like sincere praise or apology to the other party are advocated while those like exaggerating self-advantage or overemphasizing self-interest are avoided. Although meaningful advice has been provided in previous studies, the usage of courtesy in expression is inherently tied to the field of language itself. Therefore, a more comprehensive analysis of the principle of courtesy in business English correspondence can only be achieved through the application of Pragmatics.

2.2 Pragmatics

Pragmatics is an approach to the study of language that systematically considers the perspective of the speaker and the hearer, as well as the communicative needs of the speaker and the language community. Theories of Pragmatics propose that since language is fundamentally a tool, it is reasonable to analyze and understand its structures based on the functions they perform, which include covering meaning and contextual information[4]. Additionally, Pragmatics accounts for the context where linguistic elements are used and examine how they serve instrumental functions within a given
environment[5]. In the case of business English correspondence, the primary goal is to build up business relations and increase profits. How to mediate language elements appropriately to fully perform their functions in the context of cooperation is a big challenge to business English writers. Therefore, the principle of courtesy requires specific usage of words and sentences to achieve business goals.

3. The Principle of Courtesy in Business English Correspondence

3.1 The Use of Words in the Principle of Courtesy

3.1.1 The use of the second personal

The personal plays an important role in business English letters by acting as the bridge for communication. It is highly recommended to use the second personal in business English correspondence, as it demonstrates the writers' understanding of the other party. Therefore, the "you attitude" is greatly emphasized, which means standing on the position of the other party and fully considering their request, demand, interest and wish into consideration[6]. By doing so, the other party will fully feel respected and be willing to establish a business relationship. The following sentences are typical examples:

1a We have received your order and will deliver well within your time limit.

1b Your order is receiving our immediate attention, and you can depend on us to effect delivery well within your time limit.

The sentence 1b is better than 1a, as it not only accurately expresses the fact, but also shows the seller's respect and attention to the buyer. On the other hand, the sentence 1a is a bit subjective, as the first personal is used and the writer's interest is highly emphasized, leaving an arrogant and selfish impression on the buyer.

However, the second personal is not necessarily used to show courtesy. What is more important is the "you attitude." Generally speaking, in letters conveying bad news, there may be an expectation. The following sentences are typical examples:

2a Apparently you misunderstood our order. Anyway you shipped the wrong thing.

2b Apparently our instructions are not clear, with the result that the wrong article is shipped.

Although the sentence 2a uses the second personal, the buyer apparently blames the seller, with an unfriendly intonation. On the contrary, the sentence 2b employs the first and third personals to explain the fact in a more euphemistic and acceptable manner.

3.1.2 The use of the positive words

The positive words refer to those which express positive attitudes, such as helpful, thanks, pleasure and welcome, etc. The use of this kind of word is in accordance with the Approbation Maxim, particularly in business English letters requesting payment, letters of complaint and those of claim. On the other hand, negative words, like wrong, neglect and fail are generally avoided in business English letters to demonstrate courtesy and achieve business goals. The following sentences are typical examples:

3a We have received your complaint about the late arrival of goods.

3b Thank you for calling our attention to the late arrival of goods.

These two sentences are about responding to letters of complaint. Sentence 3a emphasizes the complaint made by the buyers, suggesting the seller's dissatisfaction with the buyer's behavior, which may potentially damage their relationship. Instead, the use of the positive word "thank you" in the sentence 3b is encouraged. Additionally, the phrase "calling our attention" demonstrates the sellers' regret for their mistake, the understanding of the buyer's dissatisfaction, and the intention to rectify the situation.

3.1.3 The use of the modal verbs

The subjunctive mood, which makes the expression more euphemistic and acceptable, is frequently connected with the subjunctive mood, such as should, would, could, might and shall[7]. The modal verbs are widely used in business English letters as they mainly deal with wishes, promises, approvals, suggestions, refusals and justifications, etc. Therefore, the subjunctive mood can better facilitate the business exchange and communication. The following sentences are typical examples:

4a We should appreciate it if you can advance shipment.

4b We would appreciate it if you could advance shipment.

5a If you need more information about our business status, we can answer you inquiries at any time.

5b In case you need more information about our business status, we shall be only too glad to answer your inquiries at any time.

Both the sentences 4b and 5b use the subjunctive mood to express the writers' wish, which is easy to be accepted. On the other hand, the usage of "should" and "can" in the sentence 4a and 5a respectively expresses a tough intonation, indicating the writers' arrogant attitude.

3.2 The Use of Sentences in the Principle of Courtesy

The principle of courtesy in business English correspondence is not only reflected in the usage of words, but also demonstrated by sentences patterns, such as the passive voice and the question.

3.2.1 The use of the passive voice

Although the active voice can make the expression more
powerful, the passive voice is more objective and can avoid ambiguity to some extent. Instead of mentioning or emphasizing the agent, the passive voice focuses more on the existing fact, which makes the expression more accurate and objective. It is more frequently used in some unpleasant situations of the commercial transactions to avoid more serious conflicts. In this way, the principle of courtesy is fully demonstrated. The following sentences are some typical examples:

6a If you are interested in any of the items listed in the catalogue, please send your specific enquiry to us, and we will send our quotation without delay.

6b If any of the items listed in the catalogue meet your interest, please let us have your specific enquiry, and our quotation will be forwarded without delay.

The sentence 6a uses too many personals and straightforwardly expresses the seller's wish and request, which is too rigid to be accepted. On the contrary, the sentence 6b weakens the agents and emphasizes the items, catalogue, specific enquiry and quotation. In this way, the process of establishing a business transaction will be clearer and the wish is more implicitly expressed.

3.2.2 The use of the question

When making requests in business English letters, there are three ways of expression: positive sentences, imperative sentences and questions. However, positive sentences can come across as rigid and explicit, while imperative sentences may leave a harsh or demanding impression on the readers. Consequently, using questions to express request is deemed a better choice as it allows others to ponder the request and provide an answer. The following sentences are some typical examples:

7a I want the telegraph name and approximate sailing date of the vessel on which space is booked.

7b Please telegraph the name and approximate sailing date of the vessel on which space is booked.

7c Would it be possible for you to telegraph the name and approximate sailing date of the vessel on which space is booked?

The three ways of expression are used in these sentences respectively. In the sentence 7a, the writer expresses the request straightforwardly, leaving a self-centered impression. The sentence 7b is better than 7a, but it still lacks euphemism. The expression "Would it be possible for you to" in the sentence 7c conveys the writer's attitude of respect and consulting, making the readers more comfortable.

4. Conclusion

Business English correspondence is not merely a means of communication, but also a crucial tool for establishing business relations and expanding transactions. Guided by Pragmatics, the principle of courtesy in the business English letters are supposed to be analyzed in the cooperative context.

Additionally, the writers are highly recommended to employ techniques such as adopting a "you attitude", incorporating positive words, utilizing modal verbs, employing passive voice and incorporating questions to enhance their writing skills and achieve their business goals.

References


