

商务英语信函中负面信息的表达研究

摘要

随着全球化的快速发展，各国间的贸易和业务交流越来越普遍。作为一种普遍的交流工具，商务英语信函在国际贸易中有着举足轻重的作用，恰当迂回地在商务英语信函中表达负面信息，对企业来说大有裨益。为了更有效、礼貌地表达负面信息，本论文通过对模糊语、委婉语、礼貌原则、低调陈述、和间接表达等理论的应用以及商务英语信函实例来研究分析商务信函中负面信息的表达策略。详细分析之后，按照建议方式表达负面信息效果显著，目标明确。希望本论文的研究能为以下将详述理论的理解和促进负面信息的有效表达并为国际贸易合作提供帮助。

关键词：商务英语信函 负面信息 理论应用 实例

ABSTRACT

Research on the Expression of Negative Information in Business English

Correspondence

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As the rapid development of globalization, the commerce among nations has become widespread and business communication also turns out to be universal. Business English correspondence, as one of the most popular communication tools, plays an essential role in international business trade and it will be of great advantage for enterprises to convey negative information in an appropriate and roundabout manner. In order to express negative information more effectively and politely, this thesis researches on various kinds of strategies in business English correspondence by the application of theories, including vague language, euphemism, politeness principle, understatement, and indirect approach, and the cases from business English correspondence. After the detailed analysis, the effect of the suggested ways of expressing negative information is identified and the realization of its purpose is specific. It is hoped that the findings of this thesis will provide an insight into the theories elaborated as below and facilitate the effective expression of negative information and cooperation of international business trade.

Key Words: business English correspondence; negative information; the application of theories; cases

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Chapter One Introduction

The integration of global economy is a general trend which cannot be halted, and the exchange of politics, economy and technology becomes more and more frequent. English, as a popular communication language, has become an important tool used in business English correspondence. In international trade activities, information transmission is ubiquitous and there are two aspects that can affect the receiving party, one is the content of information and the other is the way of expression. For the receiver, information is roughly divided into three parts, which are positive, neutral and negative information. Positive and neutral information can be expressed directly, but it is a plight for people to express and accept negative information. It is a fatal issue for enterprises to express negative information effectively and politely, otherwise it will affect the normal conduct of business activities or cause some undue damage to the firm. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the topic of expressing negative information in business English correspondence.

It is not just the information content, but also the way of expression that decides whether business partners can calmly accept that. Under the guidance of the following theories, including vague language, euphemism, politeness principle, understatement, and indirect approach, this paper applies authentic cases from business English correspondence to demonstrate the effects of thoughtful expression of negative information.

Chapter Two Business English Correspondence and Negative Information

It is inevitable to convey negative information to other parties when dealing with international businesses and the correspondence should be paid much more attention, for it is an effective and convenient medium of exchanging messages. As for the importance of business English correspondence and the inevitability of negative information, the thesis centers on the two themes, bases on theoretical principle and puts forward diverse methods to convey information more accurately and effectively.

2.1 Business English correspondence

In recent decades, the dramatic development of international trade has been achieved, and as one of the means of business communication, business English correspondence has been playing a decisive role in enhancing mutual understanding, establishing business approach, exchanging business information, maintaining and promoting good relationship, and facilitating the development of international economy.

2.1.1 Definition of business English correspondence

Business English correspondence is the medium to communicate and exchange information in a written format for business activities. Business English correspondence is not only a way for business communication, but also a professional language. It is an important tool to carry out international trade activities, by means of language to exchange information, taking daily business activities as the reflect object and in the form of correspondence as exchanging information carrier.

The business correspondence belongs to the applied writing, which is commonly used in business issues to contact with parties involved, to exchange ideas and information, and to discuss business affairs. The business correspondence has the property of common business letters and also the characteristics of general

correspondence. However, the accuracy and standardization is required in business correspondence because the business letter is not only regarded as the medium of communication, but also it can replace face-to-face communication, maintain and build the friendship between parties involved, shape a good image for the firm and most importantly it can attract and win customers.

2.1.2 Writing principles of business English correspondence

Due to the fierce business competition and the high-speed developing e-commerce services and technology, business English correspondence gains more and more attentions and emphases. To write appropriate business correspondences, it cannot be ignored to follow writing principles, aside from the fixed format of business English correspondence, and the well-commanded English knowledge of business people. According to Lu Mozhu (2005: 1), the objectives of business English correspondence are to obtain mutual understanding between the parties involved, and elicit the responses required. Clarity of expression can be applied to achieve the first objective, and the second demands the right approach.

In order to compose effective messages, certain communication principles must be applied in business English correspondence. These principles provide choices for content and styles of presentation, in line with the purpose and receivers of messages. To be specific, there are seven fundamental principles for business English correspondence, which are called the “seven Cs”, they are completeness, conciseness, consideration, concreteness, clarity, courtesy, and correctness. (Liu Zhiwei, 2011: 1)

Completeness means providing all necessary information, giving all answers and other extra information when required. Conciseness is saying the correspondence includes only relevant material, eliminating wordy expression and unnecessary repetition. Consideration refers to the correspondence containing each message with the receiver in mind and putting interests of readers first. Concreteness suggests using specific figures and facts, putting actions in verbs and using more imagined-building and vivid words. Clarity guides to construct effective sentences and paragraphs and

use precise and concrete words. The guidelines for courtesy are using expressions that show respect and avoiding nondiscriminatory expressions. Correctness indicates checking accuracy of figures, facts and words, applying the right level of language, and maintaining acceptable writing principles.

2.2 Negative information

There are various kinds of information needed to be conveyed in business English correspondence and most businessperson have the tendency to apply a direct approach to exchange positive or neutral information. The approach with the negative information tends to be indirect and also it is crucial to express the negative information appropriately.

2.2.1 Definition of negative information

Negative information usually refers to the bad and negative aspect, negative effect or influence. Negative information is the content that is not conducive to express and if literally expressed, it will cause awful effect. It is said that the expression of negative information can often have a negative impact, and the crossed-culture nature of business communication is increasing the difficulty of voicing negative information.

Negative information is often disappointing and unfavorable, varying from the structure, tone, and meaning of positive messages. For example, there are times when one party has bad news for its partner or customer and wishes to refuse credit facilities, or increase the price of goods and services, or complain about some issues. Such news are negative, and they should be expressed in a quite different way.

2.2.2 Writing significance of negative information

It is momentous to study the methods of expressing negative information, for its universality, inevitability, and significance. It has become a hot topic that how to control the expression of negative information, classify and summary the strategies of

expression. The success or failure of business activities relies on the reasonable application of expressing strategies.

Chapter Three The Expression of Negative Information in Business English Correspondence

Various strategies should be applied to expressing negative information in business English correspondence. This chapter makes a thorough research on five expressing strategies in business English correspondence, including vague language, euphemism, politeness principle, understatement, and indirect approach. Based on the theories already proved by experts and cases collected from business English correspondence, this chapter will expound how to felicitously express negative information in detail.

3.1 Vague language

Clarity, precision, and care in the application of language have been put great emphasis on by linguists, but quite the reverse: when it comes to negative information, combining vagueness with moderation is a useful and wise option. It is significant to notice that the use of vagueness is appropriate for the end of business English correspondence.

3.1.1 Definition of vague language

According to Peirce(1902), the originator of the notion of vagueness of language, vague language is the possible statement of things regarding which it is ambiguous by nature whether, had they been thoughtfully contemplated by the speaker.

The definition given by Channell J in his Vague Language is that an expression or word is vague if it can be contrasted with another sentence or expression that aims to convey the same proposal, and it is purposely vague.

As a kind of elastic language, vague language has features of unspecific and uncertain connotations. The most useful and enduring insights of vague language

usage is that writers tailor language to make it suitable to the situation and the context. It is hard to define vague language because of the vague nature of language itself so that there is no necessity to be entangled with it and this paper will explain the general concept of vague language by one case in business English correspondence.

3.1.2 Application of vague language

The accuracy of business language does not rule out the application of vague language. In fact, the application of vague language is always with motivations, such as enhancing the appeal of language, behaving politely, making the self-party as an active status, or forcing other parties to take on part of the responsibility politely.

Not all of business English correspondence should be specific and in certain cases, generalization is not only allowed, but it is better considering bilateral relationship and benefits.

Example 1

We have received your letter of May 10 and we are so sorry for the delay happened in the execution of your Order No. 371. It was occasioned by a heavy breakdown in the machinery of our suppliers, as a result of which all of their work was brought to a standstill situation for several days. However, the damage has been remedied and we are sure we will lose no time in the immediate delivery of the goods.

You may expect to receive the goods by the 22th.

We regret the inconvenience you have sustained.

As listed above, “for several days, lose no time, in the immediate delivery” all belong to vague language. In this example, “for several days”, “immediate delivery” expresses the time vaguely and does not point out the exact time of delivery, which avoids happening unexpected situations and being awkward to change the delivery time again. However, the phrase “lose no time” expresses eager emotions of the supplier and there is the date of receiving the goods in the letter, which can satisfies the receiver. The application of vague language for expressing negative information in this example makes a difference in relaxing the irritable mood of the customer and

making the customer assured the goods will be dispatched in no time after the delay caused by the breakdown machinery of suppliers.

Vague language is more ambiguous, and contains more meanings than clear language, but it has more intentions and is more clarified than unclear language. Vagueness is the objective attribute of human language. The expression of negative information through vague language has positive significance in regulating tense trade relationship, moderating embarrassing situation, protecting the self-party and showing respect to other parties.

3.2 Euphemism

Euphemism is a sign of politeness and courtesy at some extent and is universally-used in business English correspondence. As for the strict formation of business English correspondence and the various functions of euphemism, it is an essential prerequisite to study euphemism for forming a correspondence containing negative information. The following part will define euphemism and then give examples to show the application of euphemism by analyzing its functions.

3.2.1 Definition of euphemism

According to Bussmann (1996: 388), in *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*, euphemism is a pleasant substitution for an objectionable word that has pejorative connotations.

In the *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (2009), euphemism is “an indirect word or phrase that people chose to refer to something unpleasant or embarrassing, to make it seem more acceptable than it really is”.

In accordance with *Collins Cobuild Essential Dictionary* (1989), euphemism is “a polite word or expression that people apply when they are saying something they or others think offensive, embarrassing or unpleasant.”

Based on the definitions given above, euphemism is an expressing strategy to use less embarrassing or offensive words to communicate in a polite and pleasant way and

avoid causing conflicts. It is a figure of speech which replace a word or expression for favorable implication comparatively, rather than the harsher or more unpleasant one. The euphemism means using mild, vague or roundabout expression for harsh, blunt or direct one, and placing polite, tactful or less explicit terms to substitute the direct meaning of negative reality. Euphemism can be viewed as the grease of language and the accumulation of social culture.

3.2.2 Application of euphemism

The application of euphemism in business English correspondence is presented in diverse forms, including simple past tense, if-conditional, passive voice, subjunctive mood, interrogative mood, and mitigation of mood. The following examples will explain how to convey negative information euphemistically and politely, but in terms of the limited length of this thesis, not all of the six forms of euphemism will be demonstrated in detail.

Example 1

A: You have made a wrong decision in the process of shipment.

B: A wrong decision have been made in the process of shipment.

The application of passive voice in euphemism leaves a polite impression on the other party and averts embarrassing situation to condemn partners for the mistake of shipment. The passive voice is used tactfully so as not to indicate who acts the behavior and not to hurt the people concerned.

Example 2

We suggest you make a reasonable reduction in price, or our group could hardly go on with our discussion.

In example 2, the subjunctive mood is applied to express the requirement for reducing price. It is friendlier than the statement that I want you to make a reasonable reduction in price, or we can hardly go on with our discussion. The subjunctive mood is used to state ideas, requirements or suggestions to create a peaceful, friendly and

equal atmosphere so that the parties involved can establish stable and long-term relations.

Example 3

We wanted to know whether you could dispatch the goods two weeks earlier. The sentences above uses simple past sense, which sounds more delightful because it means what the writer say happened in the past and the reader will not be embarrassed if they have different answers from the writer at that time. The sentence put forward a friendly and polite proposal rather than a harsh one, and the replacement of the present tense makes the meaning of the sentence more mild and suitable.

3.3 Politeness principle

Leech Geoffrey believes that besides cooperation, most interactions are governed by politeness. There are two ways to formulate the politeness principle: other things being equal, to minimize impolite statements and maximize polite statements. In the next part of this chapter, the thesis will give a general definition of politeness principle and research on its functions in exchanging negative information when writing business English correspondence.

3.3.1 Definition of politeness principle

That the performance of behavior aiming at building and retaining comity, the definition of politeness, is given by Leech. The approach of Leech to politeness is a set of maxims, which he has suggested as methods of explaining how politeness operates in exchanging information.

Leech patterns politeness principle into a number of maxims: “

- a Tact Maxim;
- b Generosity Maxim;
- c Approbation Maxim;
- d Modesty Maxim;
- e Agreement Maxim;

f Sympathy Maxim”(Leech,1983: 132)

3.3.2 Application of politeness principle

With the political and economic globalization, there are more and more international communication. This paper presents an analytical study of the application of politeness principle in business English correspondence when expressing negative information.

Example 1

i We have to refuse your requirements.

ii We are sorry that we are unable to meet your requirements.

Obviously, “refuse” in the former sentence contains a coercive tone, which can cause repulsive reaction of the reader. While, taking politeness principle into consideration, the latter sentence shows appropriate respect to other party and it is a sign of Tact Maxim.

Example 2

Dear Sirs,

We have always been depending upon your paying on time. To date, however, there are no payments coming from you and if it is the consequence of force majeure or because of other reasons, we are supposed to be aware of them. It is a pleasure for us to receive your letter early.

Yours Truly

In the correspondence above, the writer mentions purposely the consistent sound reputation of the other party, and ascribes the delay of paying to carelessness or the fault of a third party. Generosity Maxim and Approbation Maxim are adopted to voice the complaint of not paying the payments on time and thinks over this mistake at the role of the other party.

3.4 Understatement

With the rapid development of understatement and the widening of its research scope, the realms of understatement are not restricted to common topics of the past and it is commonly used in business English correspondence nowadays, especially applied to express negative information.

3.4.1 Definition of understatement

Before analyzing the understatement, this thesis will make it clear that how understatement can be identified. Understatement is a form of speech and it is the opposite of embellishment, hyperbole, or overstatement, which contains an expression of less strength than what would be expected. Understatement aims at having an effect on emphasizing a fact through understating it deliberately, leaving an impression on readers by what is merely left unsaid or implied than by an explicit statement.

According to the definition given by Webster's New World Thesaurus (1971), understatement is "a statement to be stated or described in a deliberately restrained manner in order to achieve greater force or effectiveness."

Understatement is a figure of speech utilized by writers or speakers to intentionally make a situation seem less terrible than it really is. In the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, understatement is "a statement that makes something less important, impressive, serious, etc. than it really is". (2009:2196)

3.4.2 Application of understatement

As the definition given above, this part of the chapter will offer a more detailed and dynamic analysis about understatement. Therefore, the part as below will shed light on the understanding and application of understatement in business English correspondence.

Example 1

Dear Sirs:

We are grateful that you invite us to attend the 2017 International Forum. As our machines are not in perfect situations and the time is not fit for your schedule, we are sorry that we shall not be able to come.

We look forward to meeting you on other future occasions.

Yours sincerely

The words underlined are the sign for the application of understatement. Judging one thing from another angle, namely describing something in reverse such as replacing ‘not in perfect situations’ for ‘bad situation’, using ‘not fit’ over ‘colliding’, applying ‘shall not’ instead of ‘refuse’. It is advantageous to adopt understatement to alleviate the tense tone of the writer and avoid the absolute evaluation for things.

It is said that people prefer to accept the utterances pleasing to the ear instead of those embarrassing or harsh. The information having either negative effect or uncomfortable situations cannot be easy, not to say to be appreciated. Based on the communicative need, understatement is used to mitigate the embarrassment or unhappiness brought about by negative information.

3.5 Indirect approach

Negative information in business English correspondence can apply effectively the indirect approach, in situations such as negative replies to request of sales inquiries, claims and adjustment, credit requests, orders that cannot be filled, or refusal to invitations or favors. Writers should always remember to keep the needs of readers in mind and try to show priorities and benefits to readers, even unfavorable and negative information.

3.5.1 Definition of indirect approach

The indirect approach often begins with a buffer, such as a relevant pleasant, neutral, or receiver-benefited statement. It is required to introduce the topic first, establish the circumstances step by step, and then systematically build on it until

writers carry readers to the climax of the correspondence, namely the main and important message.

It is universally used to exchange unfavorable, persuasive, and negative information in business English correspondence, and the indirect approach is suitable for negative messages for it uses a reader-centered perspective and gives readers a space to accept bad news by degrees.

3.5.2 Application of indirect approach

The application of indirect approach starts with something positive to soften the grievous news a bit, which is also called the buffer-material designed to mitigate negative information and to win understanding and trust.

Example 1

Dear Mr. Smith

Thank you for your letter of April 21, 2016. I am very glad to know that you are interested in purchasing office furniture from our company and I am looking forward to supplying high quality products for you without any delay.

However, unfortunately, it is seemed that you have used the old version of price list. I believe you will understand that we need to revise our prices occasionally like any business to follow inflation and rising costs such as raw material and transport. I am enclosing our updated product items and price list with the correspondence. Should you still want to order the items specified in your letter? If so, you will figure out the total cost is US\$26,350.

I wish you will think the price is acceptable and we are looking forward to dispatching those items on your order. If you have any questions, please contact me without any hesitation.

Yours sincerely

We can see from the example mentioned above, this correspondence starts with buffer statement that it is a pleasure for the writer to have orders from Mr. Smith. Then it is generally followed by background explanation for the change of prices,

which in turn is the negative information. The ending part is positive and courteous messages that the wish to continue the cooperation with the reader.

That the main idea and positive news first, or buffer statements and warm-up first is better for readers to accept negative information. Also it is suggested to start with something attention-getting information at the beginning. Supporting details for background information introduce the problem or issue and ending statements provide goodwill messages or concrete actions to take.

Chapter Four Conclusion

This thesis studies the expression of negative information in business English correspondence through analyzing cases from five aspects, including vague language, euphemism, politeness principle, understatement, and indirect approach. To begin with, the understanding and writing principle of business English correspondence is given to emphasize its importance in the global market. It is an essential prerequisite to strengthen the expression of negative information because of its unavoidable existence and writing significance. Then the detailed analysis for the five strategies is explained one by one through examples. Vague language is ambiguous, and has more ideas and purposes beyond words. It is significant to apply vague language to convey negative information in business letters for it can relieve tense situations among parties, strengthen business relationships, and create an harmonious atmosphere. There are various forms to present euphemism, but all is to make a harsh or negative message into gentle and roundabout one. Politeness principle shows respect and politeness to readers, just as its name implies. Describing one thing in a reverse way is one of the forms of understatement, which is useful to weaken the negative influence of bad news. Indirect approach is applied to express negative information indirectly and the tactful usage aims to buff the negative effect for business activities. The study shows that all the five strategies play momentous role for the expression of negative information in business English correspondence and in the international business.

It is indispensable to write negative information and is valuable to study its expression. Limited by the length of the thesis, this paper is just a small project, and other expressing strategies such as pragmatics, rhetoric, and cooperative principle have not yet been expanded. It is suggested that a longitudinal and transverse investigation on the expression of negative information in business English correspondence should be conducted sometime.

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