

The Application of Euphemisms in Commercial Correspondence from the Perspective of Politeness Principle

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Abstract

Politeness principle plays an important role in international commercial correspondence. As a big part of politeness principle, the appropriate use of euphemisms contributes a lot to the compliance of politeness principle and success of foreign trade. In this paper, ways of applying euphemisms are studied on the levels of lexicon, tense, voice and syntax, etc..

Keywords: euphemisms; interculture; commercial correspondence; politeness principle

I. INTRODUCTION

The world has been seeing the continuous deepening of economic globalization and the thriving development of multi-national enterprises, which help to promote the role of international trade in this globalization trend. English, the widest used communicative language, plays an important part in it. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the research and use of commercial English particularly for those non-English speaking economies. And commercial correspondence is a special part of intercultural communication, which has proved to have profound connotation, enhance the international business negotiations and better serve the international trade. Politeness theories can not only be widely used in people's daily conversation and exchanges but they can also be of great help in the wide range of business written discourses[1].

However, failures of politeness often happen and exist as an obstacle for the rapid development of international trade. Politeness is a universal matter and people all over the world prefer politeness with a series of protocols and taboos formed during their history. Just like every nationality has its unique national character, every country, district or even every tribe has some certain politeness principles that only belong to itself. It is these politeness differences that lead to misunderstanding between people from different countries, districts or even tribes. Euphemism is a big part of politeness principle and is used extensively in commercial correspondences. The use of euphemism can help to express views and put forward requests or

suggestions in a polite, implicit, skillful and appropriate way so as to create a good business environment, to achieve the purpose of both sides. Therefore, the importance of euphemism can not be ignored in foreign trade activities. With this respect, the paper is designed to present a general introduction of the application of euphemism in commercial correspondence.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Politeness Principle

The study of politeness phenomenon has always been one of the topics of pragmatics. It's necessary for us to first briefly review some important politeness theories in recent years. In his paper *Logic and Conversation*, H. P. Grice pointed out both the speaker and the receiver should abide by the "Cooperative Principle" in order to ensure the smoothness in the communication process [2]. Lakoff extends Grice's work, assuming the relationship between the two parties of a conversation is more important than the communication itself and the relationship between the two sides must be strengthened, so the factors that determine the politeness of a conversation are more important. Lakoff suggests the maxim of "be polite" to explain the use and interpretation of polite language as distinct from the more practical use of language. Lakoff further describes three sub-maxims to "Be polite" that the speaker might follow in choosing to be polite [3]. These are adapted as follows:

Rule 1: Don't Impose, that is not to interfere with other people's things,

Rule 2: Give Options, that is to let the receiver choose

Rule 3: Make the Hearer Feel Good, that is, the establishment of a kind of equality.

According to Lakoff, the degree of politeness relies on the situation where conversation happens. On formal occasions, speakers should try best not to impose on hearers and behave as what the social norm requires and try best to maintain the formal atmosphere. In informal conversations, where speakers and hearers are with equal power and status, speakers should choose to give options to hearers so as to save the positive face. Finally, the rule to make hearer feel good cannot be ignored in any situations.

Based on Grice's cooperative principle, Geoffrey Leech put forward "Politeness Principle", which is composed of such six maxims as tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy. While admitting that there are different degrees of politeness, Leech has not calibrated the scales in any precise way. "It is not easy to verify exactly how the scales inform the use of a particular maxim, which in turn motivates the linguistic choice of politeness" [4]). In this regard, it will be seen that the face-saving view of Brown and Levinson, on the other hand, while using similar concepts, provides a more precise formulation. The face-saving view, proposed in Brown and Levinson's theory is considered to be the most influential and best known of the recent approaches to an account of politeness. The face is the social interaction in the people to win the positive social value. Social interaction should comply with the social norm of "be thoughtful" to take care of others' face, lest it bring embarrassment or bad relationship. Based on the theory of Goffman's Politeness theory, Brown & Levinson distinguish two kinds of face: positive face and negative face, positive is hoping to get the approval of others. Negative face is to expect others not to impose on them, that is, their behavior is not subject to others.

B. Euphemism

Euphemism literally means "not directly speaking". Its corresponding English word euphemism comes from Greek, "pleasant/good speech" or "to speak with good words or in a pleasant manner". Neaman explained it as "substituting an inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit, offensive one, thereby

veneering the truth by using kind words”[5]. Euphemism, as one of the most useful forms of devices, exists in all kinds of languages and plays very important and practical roles in various aspects of our lives. It is a proper form used in our social communication in order to achieve special effects. It is a universal phenomenon used in language by human beings. It goes without saying that euphemism reflects our mental world, culture, and value of society. Therefore, it has important social functions. It can maintain the use and efficiency of the words of taboo. A good knowledge of euphemism can make us keep a good relationship and promote effective communication among our humans. It is clear to see that different kinds of euphemisms may have a common feature: a polite or favorable interpretation of a bad word. As a part of politeness principles, euphemism has found its wide application in various kinds of works, including business English letters.

In terms of business English letters, euphemism plays two important functions in the process of international business activities.

(1) Politeness function: to respect others, keep them from being hurt, avoid presumption and indecent assault in communication, and make them accept some bad things pleasantly. Euphemisms are used in general to show one's politeness and respect.

(2) Functions of building and maintaining a good relationship: euphemisms are applied to coordinate the social relations and maintain a good relationship in a long run in international business. In the process of writing a business English letter, it is wise to make adaptation to the other party and apply some expressions that can make him or her maintain a good emotion even though it may cause some losses to him or her. Such kind of device can help both of them build and maintain a good cooperative relationship.

Euphemism is a big part of politeness principle and is used extensively in commercial correspondences. Vague language, affective words, gentle verbs and interrogative and conditional sentences are all manifestation of euphemism. This section will mainly adopt euphemism as a part of politeness principles to analyze cases. Besides, negative communication will be included following euphemism to which great importance needs to be attached to.

III. APPLICATION OF EUPHEMISM

The application of euphemism can be realized in several aspects apart from the layer of lexicons. The change of tense, voice and syntax can also make effects on euphemistic degree in English commercial correspondence.

A. Vague Expression

Vagueness, as defined by Joanna Channell is “an expression of a vague word if: a. it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition; b. it is purposely and unabashedly vague; c. its meaning arises from the intrinsic uncertainty”[6]. The use of vagueness, as an effective communicative strategy to realize euphemism, is widely adopted in business English letters. Broadly speaking, the vagueness used in business English letters consists of lexical vagueness and syntactical vagueness. Here, this paper will only discuss the lexical vagueness used in business English letters.

Vague expression in commercial correspondences aims to achieve a much more indirect and polite effect. When a positive message needs to be conveyed, limiting words like “quite”, “rather”, “very”, “pretty” can be used as an emphasis on the positive message. Meanwhile, when a negative message has to be conveyed, limiting words like “a little bit” “sort of ” “kind of” “somewhat” can be used as a mitigation of the negative meaning so as to save face for others.

Eg.1. Your reply is a little bit late.

Eg.2. Your reply is late.

Example One used “a little bit” to ease up the negative meaning, making the other party aware of his being late and saving his face at the same time, which provides some possibility for further cooperation.

Example Two seems like a criticism of the other party.

Eg.3. Could you lower the price a bit so that we can conclude the transaction.

Eg.4 Could you lower your price so that we can conclude the transaction

Example Three expresses in a tone of negotiation which sounds tender and shows more sincerity, while Example Four shows no sincerity with only an abrupt asking for depreciation without mentioning a range.

B. Affective Words

Affective words like “please” “satisfy” “thanks” “obliged” “appreciate” “regretful” “sorry” which are full of affective meaning will comfort the other part both physically and mentally so that cooperation can be realized.

Eg.5 We are grateful to you for pointing out the incident and have arranged for the immediate dispatch of the altered items from the last delivery.

Example Five is filled with gratefulness and the urgent expectation of the other part can be immediately seen from this sentence. However, if this message is changed in this way: We have received your letter concerning the incident and have arranged for the immediate dispatch of the altered items from the last delivery. This is only a notice that tells the other part of the delivery of altered items, which carries no communication of feelings and shows no reaction for self fault.

C. Change of Tense

In commercial correspondences and business negotiations, people often take advantage of past tense when words that carry subjective meanings like “think” “hope” “wonder” and “sure” are used in order to avoid impoliteness.

Besides, past tense is also used as a tone of inquiry and consultation, usually referred to as “attitudinal past tense”. Present “requirement” “hope” “suggestion” are raised in simple past tense, creating distance on the level of both time and space. This actually reflects a comprehensive consideration of the other part’s face, creating harmonious atmosphere for further business development and relation establishment. Therefore, the subjunctive mood constructed by modal verbs like “could”, “should”, “would” and verb stems often can be seen in commercial correspondences to show politeness.

Eg.6 We wanted to know whether you could reduce the minimum quantity.

Eg.7 We want to know whether you could reduce the minimum quantity.

Compared with Example seven, Example six eases up the stiffness that the word “want” generates and shows an intention for inquiry and consultation, making it much easier for the other part to accept this requirement.

D. Avoidance of Directive Negative Words

In communication, it is evitable that the words of direct negation may cause displeasure and even offensiveness to the other side. Therefore, in the field of international business, it is unwise for business people to use these words since the establishment of long-time cooperation relationship is their ultimate goal. Therefore, it is a common sense that, in the field of international business trade, the use of direct negative expressions is easy to cause an unpleasant mental state for the reader and unfavorable to establish a long

term cooperation relationship. In view of this, the writer should avoid such kind of expressions to a great degree. However, in a certain condition, it is essential for them to manifest their emotion of dissatisfaction or discontent. Under such kind of situation, the employ of some weakened negative words is in great need.

In foreign trade correspondence, words of negative meanings such as no, cannot, never may cause unpleasant feeling and damage cooperation between both parts. On the basis of the politeness principle, we often avoid using words with negative meanings. Instead, the use of hardly, unfortunately, rather, slightly and other degree adverbs is an alternative way to weaken the tone of tough voice and to create an atmosphere of politeness and respect. Such as:

Eg. 8 I'm really sorry that our products can hardly satisfy your requirement.

In the sentence, "hardly" is a euphemism for "not", which is used to avoid being absolute.

E. Passive Sentences

The omission of the doer makes the meaning of the passive voice ambiguous. In some cases of foreign trade correspondence, the use of passive voice makes the tone seem mild and indirect rather than aggressive, thus more in line with the stylistic features of business English. The passive voice emphasizes the bearer of an action and reduces the rendering of the doer's role, which contributes to modest manners effect.

Eg.9 You failed to enclose the price list in your letter.

Eg. 10 The price list was not enclosed in your letter.

The active voice in Example nine contains a clear tone of blaming, which is likely to hurt the other's face. In contrast, the use of passive voice hides the role of the subject so that the expression becomes more moderate and polite.

F. Interrogative and Conditional Sentences

When drafting a business English letter, the writer may sometimes want to propose suggestions, requirements or criticism, etc. In these cases, in order to diminish the tone of ordering to a minimum degree, the writer may refer to the use of interrogative sentence.

Eg.11 Would you please send us your latest sample machine?

The buyer uses interrogative sentences by employing a sentence pattern "would you please" which is more euphemistic than using imperative sentences to show his or her euphemistic requirements or suggestions of obtaining some information, i.e. quotation, catalogue list and price from the seller's side.

Eg.12 It would be highly appreciated if you could look into the execution of our order dated 7th June for three cartons of personal computers, which should have reached our destination two weeks ago.

By giving freedom of action on the part of the receiver, conditional clause, especially subjunctive-condition works to minimize the imposition, helps to express his or her concern for the delivery and most importantly makes the request more polite and the other party feel more comfortable.

IV. CONCLUSION

Euphemism functions efficiently in saving face and minimizing cost of others. Vague expression, affective words, changes of tense, gentle verbs and interrogative and conditional sentences are the main forms of euphemism, which contribute a lot to communication through commercial correspondences. When negative information such as refusal has to be conveyed, it is important in particular to save face for the other party, so as to reach possible cooperation in the future.

In conclusion, politeness can be achieved with the forms of euphemism in commercial correspondence in the level of lexicon and grammar. In the level of lexicon, there are affective words, vagueness, and

weakened negative words. In the level of grammar, there are passive voice, conditional clause, past tense, and interrogative sentence.

Further researches can have a reference to the latest politeness principles in commercial correspondences as some perceptions of the world are changing all the time and we can't expect an idea that remains the same throughout human history, which will represent a setback of the society. Training system for writing commercial correspondences politely can be built in further researches, which can have a statistic analysis of the efficiency of all the letters and thus draw enough attention from companies engaging intercultural business.

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