

The learning and teaching euphemism in business letters

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ABSTRACT: According to Flynn's Principle Branching Direction (1984), English and Chinese belonged to two different language systems. English was right-branching language and Chinese was left-branching language, and that was the basic knowledge to interfere students to learn English well. Existing in different kinds of cultures, euphemism is a way of expression to substitute implicit language for harsh words. This paper is the analysis about learning and teaching of euphemism in business letters. Since business letters play more and more important roles in business, businessmen have attached great importance to figure out how to establish long and friendly relationship with clients through business letters. This paper will make a thorough analysis about the realization of euphemism in business letters from two aspects as word and grammar, and it will introduce three main functions of euphemism in business letter.

Keywords: business letters; euphemism; implication

1 INTRODUCTION

Along with China's further opening to the outside world and successful accession to the WTO, its foreign trade develops a lot. Consequently, foreign business letters are frequently used as an important tool for Chinese businessmen to get in touch with clients in other countries. In order to promote China's economy and trade, Chinese businessmen should pay attention to the quality of business letters. In regard to the quality of business letters, one of the most important factors is to make people who read the letters feel comfortable. This way of communication is called euphemism.

The application of euphemistic expressions in business is very wide, involving almost all the activities and areas of business. Euphemism is a "lubricant" in language communication activities. Businessmen can use the "lubricant" to express their different opinions and wishes reservedly, politely and indirectly. Euphemism can be also used to put forward requirements, show unwillingness and convey dissatisfaction. By applying euphemism to foreign business letters, it can avoid the use of command tone, create good business environment and build harmonious negotiation atmosphere. All these can help businessmen to keep customers, develop business relations and reach an ideal goal which both sides are looking forward to. As

a result, efficiently mastering the way of using euphemism in business letters has very important significance.

Then there will come out a question about how businessmen can have the ability to use euphemism proficiently and efficiently in business letters. The purpose of this paper is to give a specific analysis of the characteristics of euphemism in business letters so that businessmen can understand how to realize euphemism in their own letters. Euphemistic expressions in foreign business letter include pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and pragmatics and so on. This paper will analyze the use of euphemism in business letters mainly from the perspective of words and grammar.

2 EUPHEMISM

2.1 *Definition of euphemism*

The word "euphemism" showed up in Greece for the first time. In Greece, prefix "eu" means "good" and root "phemism" means "speech", so "euphemism" means "nice words".

The definition of euphemism by Stocker and Hartmann in their works "Language and Linguistics Dictionary (2000)" is replacing words which make people feel unpleasant or disrespected with words which are

vague to make people feel pleasant.

However, the definition given by “Linguistics Dictionary (2003)” is expressing facts and thinking in a mild and warm way in order to decrease its degree of vulgarness. In a word, euphemism is a kind of implicit and indirect expression used by the speaker under a certain situation in daily communication.

2.2 Classification of euphemism

There are two kinds of euphemism called traditional euphemism and stylistic euphemism (Wang, 2010). Traditional euphemism refers to those related with taboo language like birth, illness, death, sex, pee and so on. If it is expressed directly, people may have the feeling of vulgarness, crudeness, harshness and rudeness, and that is taboo language. On the contrary, if it is expressed indirectly, people may have the feeling of elegance and politeness, and that is euphemism. Stylistic euphemism has nothing to do with taboo, and it is actually flattery and praising. In order to show politeness, avoid conflicts, or strive for cooperation in the process of communication, English or American will sometimes use decorative ways to modify unpleasant words.

3 THE WAY TO SHOW EUPHEMISM IN BUSINESS LETTERS

Words are used as tools to express thinking and emotions. Business letters belong to formal letters with many formal words. However, excessive formal words may make people feel hard, rigid, overcautious and dull towards the letter. Good business letters should devote particular care to the selection of words. Abundant use of euphemism will create good atmosphere and strengthen the communication between both sides.

3.1 The use of words to show euphemism

3.1.1 Grateful words

In business letter, frequent use of grateful and appreciative sayings can enhance the degree of politeness to make the other side feel warm, happy and satisfied. In this way, euphemism can truly play a role of lubricant (Chen, 2011).

E.g. 1. We highly appreciate your kind cooperation.

E.g. 2. Thank you for your quotation of July 24 for 1000 tons of oil.

E.g. 3. We are extremely grateful to you.

The words “appreciate, thank and grateful” above not only give expression to the basic meaning of the sentence, but also transfer the happy mood of writer so that it can make the other side feel the same. However, it should be noticed that the abuse of praising words

may have opposite results, making people feel insincere.

3.1.2 Vague words

Vague words are a kind of decent euphemism. If they are used appropriately, the effect of trading cooperation will be doubled. Under pleasant situation, it can help to reinforce the degree of praise and gratefulness; under unpleasant situation, it can help to make words sound less unpleasant so that the receiving side will not feel shamed or embarrassed.

E.g. 4. We were very pleased to receive your order NO.23 for TV.

E.g. 5. We regret to say that we cannot accept your offer, as your price found on the high side.

“Very” in E.g. 4 proves that the grateful emotion is not enough to say out. “Regret” in E.g. 5 not only expresses the meaning of their unwillingness to the price, but also avoids direct refusal. These two vague words make the letter more joyful.

3.1.3 Modal verbs

Most of the time modal verbs can be used to show politeness in requirement, request and suggestion in business letters (Chen 2011). When the present tense is needed, the past tense of modal verbs such as “should”, “could” and “might” can make the tone more relaxed and acceptable, and consequently realizing ideal business communication.

E.g. 6. It would be appreciated if you could forward samples to us.

“Would” in E.g. 6 expresses the gratefulness of the writer. It could not be better if samples can be forwarded, while if not, it is all right all the same. Besides, the writer should correctly use every modal verb according to the degree of politeness and different situation.

3.1.4 Written words

Basic words and spoken words are always replaced with meaningful written words, such as “tell” which is replaced with “inform”, “sent” which is replaced with “dispatch”, “wrong packing” which is replaced with “improper packing”, and “bad quality” which is replaced with “inferior quality”. These written words make the expression of business letters more appropriate.

E.g. 7. The broken glass was attributed to improper packing.

In E.g. 7, the reason of the worn glass is caused by wrong packing. Instead of unfriendly reproaching to the quality of packing materials or packing methods, the writer uses a more mild word “improper”. This kind of way does not make the other side feel ashamed,

in fact, it shows preciseness and consideration. At the same time, it implies that the mistake does not affect their business relationship, which helps to push the success of cooperation.

3.2 *The use of grammar to show euphemism*

Compared with common English, the expression in business letters is more professional, the words are more euphemistic and the content is more proper in handling with the details. From the respect of grammar, the usage of euphemism in business letters mainly includes voice, mood and tense.

3.2.1 *Passive voice*

Initiative voice can make the whole passage smooth and simultaneously highlight the characteristic of the subject. It can also clearly express the position and opinion of both sides. However, when expressing the meaning of claim, complaint and refusal, it will be impolite to directly use initiative voice. If the passive voice is used now, it can show politeness and weaken the fault of the other side. It may give people the feeling of talking about the matter, not the people. What it emphasizes on is the obligation and duties in accordance with the contract. It can not only keep face but also show sincerity. At the same time, it gives stress to the rights and liabilities of both sides. Therefore, the passive voice is widely used in business letters (Gu, 2011).

E.g. 8. We should, however, remind you that under the terms of the policy this claim should have been submitted within three days of the accident.

E.g. 9. If you will refer to our order No.555, you will find that the delivery was required on or before 1st May.

Passive voice leaves out subject and focuses on object. The use of “should have been submitted” and “was required” avoids directly pointing out the fault of the other side. It not only indicates the position of the writer but also avoids embarrassment and conflict caused by harsh words, which is beneficial to the agreement of transaction.

3.2.2 *Subjunctive mood*

In terms of the price, shipment, claim and insurance in the transaction, it cannot be avoided to propose suggestion, advice, request or even order. In order to weaken the loss of face for the other side, subjunctive mood can be used to express points and suggestion mildly (Huang, 2012). Consequently, it can build up equal and harmonious atmosphere to make both sides cooperate better to reach the expected goal.

E.g. 10. If it were not for the regular orders we receive from a number of our customers, we could not have quoted for supplies even at those prices.

Because of the use of subjunctive mood, the tense atmosphere of the negotiation is highly alleviated. This kind of polite language strategy can avoid conflict caused by direct expression. It can help to establish business relationship and the final success of the transaction. Thus it can be seen that euphemism is very important in business letters.

3.2.3 *Negativism*

Negativism is often used in daily life. For instance, when someone says: “I think his idea is great”, he or she means to support the idea or suggestion, but to think one's idea is great is rather absolute and also ignores others' opinion. Replacing “great” with “not bad” is a typical method in negativism. It not only avoids being radical but also expresses one's thoughts thoroughly (Chen, 2011). Negativism is commonly applied in business English. Businessmen make use of negativism to negotiate with others as well as keep a good and long-term working relationship. Thus, it's a very common method to express one's thought using negativism euphemistically.

E.g. 11. We are very sorry not to be in a position to accept your order, but hope that you will understand our situation.

If “refuse” is said directly to the other side, the conclusion of the contract and the long-term business relationship will be badly influenced. It can be seen that negativism is very important in the expression of euphemism.

3.2.4 *Past tense*

In daily communication, putting the tense to the past is very common to alleviate tones (Ma, 2011). “Could you do me a favor” is more polite than “can you do me a favor” and make it more acceptable. In the same way, if the form of a verb is changed into past tense to show request, requirement or even disagreement, it can maintain self-benefit as well as avoid embarrassment. Thus, it can help the negotiation to go on smoothly and establish long-term business relationship.

E.g. 12. It would not be fair if the loss be totally imposed on us as the liability rests with both parties.

Past tense can alleviate the tone to immediately make the opinion more discussable and acceptable, and it can also guarantee the negotiation under harmonious and friendly atmosphere.

4 THE FUNCTION OF EUPHEMISM IN BUSINESS LETTERS

The foremost reason for the usage of euphemisms in the foreign business letter is to communicate with clients more smoothly, so as to reach the expected

result. Generally, euphemism can be applied to the refusal, request and dissatisfaction.

4.1 *The function of rejection*

Business letters is the conventional method of business communication. How to refuse the demand of clients is a problem. It not only needs to reject the adverse demand of clients but also retain clients (Li, 2009).

E.g. 13. We are afraid that your price is not appropriate for this kind of good, but we may recommend you another kind of goods for the price you asked.

4.2 *The function of request*

If the other side is asked to accept or have some action towards the request, there must be loss existed. In order to make the loss more acceptable to the other side, polite and tactful expression are always needed, thus a relatively polite way.

E.g. 14. If you agree to have the goods in two equal lots, please let us know so that we can make arrangements accordingly.

E.g. 15. Should, by chance, your corporation not deal with the import of Electric Goods, we would be most grateful if this letter could be forwarded to the correct corporation.

In E.g. 15, the writer asks the other side to send the letters to related import companies selling electrical appliances. It means that the writer asks for additional service without payment but the additional service is beneficial to them. Originally, the receiver has no responsibility to the request, so the writer use a relative euphemistic way to carry out direct imposition, which is more polite than saying it directly.

4.3 *The function of dissatisfaction*

Criticism, warning, reproach and rebuke, which are conflicting to social function, are in fact impolite (Li, 2009). If such messages are needed to be accepted and the writer wants to achieve an expected communication goal, it requires quite high politeness.

5 THE GUIDANCE AND IMPLICATION FOR TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

Teachers should focus on the teaching contrast on Chinese-English language culture. Due to lacking of the cross-culture knowledge, many students are impacted by the negative transfer of mother tongue. They think the only difference is language tool between English and Chinese writing, so they easily bring Chinese writing rules into English writing. It is very difficult to overcome the negative transfer in a short

time. Therefore, teachers should introduce conscious culture, systematically analyze the cross-linguistic perspective on writing and help students build up the cross-cultural awareness. In class, teachers should effectively combine the teaching materials and contrast the two languages on vocabulary, fixed expression, syntax, discourse structure and so on. Through this method, it might help students decrease the errors of negative transfer of mother tongue in writing. By the interaction between teachers and students, they all understand the differences of communication strategy and mode of thinking between English and Chinese. It might help students express their views more explicitly and effectively in writing.

Learners should enhance the optimal language input. Reading and writing are both important input and output ways in the foreign language learning process. As described by Krashen (1983) in language input hypothesis, only input enough, we may get better output. Extensive reading may not only strengthen students' language accumulation and foster English sensitivity, but also supply them with the correct application examples about various grammars. Thereby it enhances students' grammatical sensitivity. Besides reading, the input method of enhancing comprehension, reciting is also an important method. It may provide abundant output information for learners. Through imitating and making flexible use of those materials, learners may express naturally and fluently. All these may help students overcome the difficulty of negative transfer interferences in English writing.

It is not enough to present and sum up the differences between English and Chinese only. Back translation is a good method, which let learners consolidate this knowledge and internalization. Before writing compositions, if students could translate well, it might help them know the writing skills. A so-called back translation is a process of translating the certain language translation back into the original language. That is to say, translate the part again, translate others or yourself back to the original version. It is used by testing the effectiveness of literal translation and accuracy of the translation, which is also an effective and interesting method of learning English. By contrasting the students' translation with the book, it may help students find the differences in English and Chinese, and their English expression deficiencies consciously and actively. Just because of the learners' consciously independent behavior, it can be more effective than the simple presentation.

Students should be trained collaboratively when learning business letters writing. After all, it is limited and not enough to train students only in class. The next important step is to guide students to extracurricular independent training and to stimulate their enthusiasm and interests of writing exercises. According to my teaching experience, the author would suggest to set up students' learning groups for two to four students in each group. Each person was asked to extract

down the typical, beautiful or local English sentences in their spare time. Then they were asked to translate those sentences into Chinese by themselves and then to find the Chinese translation version. Finally let the other members in the group do back translation exercises. By contrasting and analyzing two kinds of translations, students might find their weakness and then they would know the authentic English. Meanwhile, group members could ask a question to each other after reading excellent English business letters writing. All of the members were asked to write the same theme articles, to compare with the model essay and to summarize the disparity and imitate the model writing, then make it better. In a word, by the collaboration training, it might not only stimulate students' writing passions and motivation, but also help them find their problems more easily. The learners might also find a solution, share the resources and make progress through the supervision and collaboration.

Finally, we must attach importance to evaluation supervision. Although we advocate students to think in English, it is still difficult to do it. Teachers often met with the following situations. Some students did

not cherish their writings. Teachers became their only readers. Except for glancing at the grades, few students were interested in the errors corrected carefully by teachers in compositions. It is workable, practical and necessary to learn about the euphemism in business letters. If such key points are grasped, they can help businessmen to have a better understanding of the original letters and to write excellent business letters. Excellent business letters can make the communication with the opposite party more active and smooth. Therefore, the business process can be pushed forward to reach an agreement and deepen mutual business relationship.

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