

Study on Application of the Coherence Principle to Business English Correspondence and Its Teaching Implications

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ABSTRACT

Coherence is one important concept in discourse analysis. This paper selects one case of business English correspondence as the research subject to demonstrate how the coherence principle is applied to business English discourse. Through analyzing cohesion and coherence in business English correspondence, we can achieve logical, meaningful and coherent purposes, which guide us to write effective and coherent business English correspondence. Then the paper provides some teaching implications accordingly.

Keywords: *coherence, business English correspondence, teaching implications*

I. INTRODUCTION

With the development of foreign trade, business English correspondence is playing an increasingly important role in international communication. Business English correspondence has its unique lexical feature, syntactic structure and stylistic feature, which deserve our close attention. This paper analyzes application of the coherence principle to business English correspondence from the perspective of discourse analysis, expecting to provide some implications for English teaching.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE COHERENCE PRINCIPLE

Discourse analysis is concerned with the way sentences or utterances are connected together in a discourse [1]. One main principle in structuring linguistic discourse is coherence. Coherence means that the meaning of utterances should be orderly, uniform and logic, even when the connections are not explicitly made. One of the factors that contribute to coherence is cohesion, which refers to the way sentences or utterances are connected in meaning through observable features of grammar and vocabulary. The grammatical devices we use to create such connections are called cohesive devices. According to Halliday and Hasan,

there are five major types of cohesive devices: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. The application of these devices is a typical way to achieve coherence.

Cohesion and coherence are two major concepts in discourse analysis. Cohesion is primarily concerned with the forms and structures present in the text. However, coherence focuses more specifically on the psychological concepts such as background knowledge, beliefs, and expectations. In this sense, coherence has a broader sense than cohesion. As suggested by coherence, what is said or written will make sense in terms of the familiar and the expected experience of each individual. Generally, we tend to make instant interpretations of familiar material and tend not to see possible alternatives. Whatever assumption is made, it is inevitably based on what we have in mind and not only on what is in the text. For example:

A: That's the phone.

B: I'm in the bath.

A: OK.

At first glance, B's response seems not to be related to A's utterance. But if we analyze it based on our background knowledge or familiar experience, we can find that tacit understanding and discourse coherence exist in each person's mind.

A: That's the phone. (Can you answer it, please?)

B: I'm in the bath. (I cannot answer it.)

A: OK. (I'll answer it.)

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Based on what has been analyzed above, a conclusion can be drawn that realization of coherence involves not only application of cohesive devices, but also tacit understanding of lexicon and context. In the following section, the author will explore application of the coherence principle to business correspondence from the perspectives of cohesive devices, lexical cohesion and paragraph organization.

III. APPLICATION OF THE COHERENCE PRINCIPLE TO BUSINESS ENGLISH CORRESPONDENCE

The source of the sample in this paper comes from the book *Business English Correspondence* (on Page 100) authored by Xu Meirong in 2006 [2]. This book abounds with plenty of representative business English correspondence covering a wide range of business affairs. Moreover, the correspondence samples of this book all come from business practice, which ensures authenticity of the sample in this paper. The correspondence in "Fig. 1" is the sample of this paper.

Dear Mr Gray,

Re: L/C No. 2233 Amendment

Your letter of credit No. 2233 issued by the Bank of Barclays has arrived.

On examination, we find that transshipment and partial shipment are not allowed.

As direct sailing to Liverpool is infrequent, we have to ship via London more often than not. As a result, transshipment may be necessary. With regard to partial shipment, it would speed matters up if we could ship immediately the goods we have in stock instead of waiting for the whole shipment to be completed.

With this in mind, we faxed you today, asking for the letter of credit to be amended to read: "partial shipment and transshipment allowed".

We trust this amendment will meet with your approval and you will fax us to that effect without delay.

Yours faithfully,

Fig. 1. The sample of business English correspondence.

The writer of this correspondence devotes a great deal of cohesive devices to connect pieces of information. By paying attention to these cohesive devices the receiver is able to grasp the communicative end. How these devices function in this correspondence is analyzed as follows.

- Substitution

The word "it" in the third paragraph stands for "partial shipment" in the previous sentence, and "this amendment" in the last paragraph points to the reference in the preceding sentence. This allows us both not to repeat the same information and to signal that the second sentence is linked to the preceding one.

- Conjunctions and other conjunction-like links

In the second paragraph, the phrase "As a result" signals that there is a causal relation between the two sentences, and the phrase "with regard to" also links the sentence to the one in the second paragraph.

- Repetition of key pronouns

In the whole correspondence, the two key pronouns "we" and "you" are frequently repeated to ensure clear references. The necessary repetition of them makes

clear which side is responsible for taking which action. As a result, the interrelation between the two sides is directly revealed and internal coherence is thus achieved.

- Ellipsis

The word "are" is left out in the last sentence of paragraph 4 because it is totally predictable based on the sentence. Since we reconstruct the missing information by taking the context into consideration, this ellipsis is actually a linking device.

- Lexical cohesion

In the third paragraph, the word "transshipment" is related to the preceding sentence in meaning because it is indeed the generalization of that sentence. Likewise, the phrase "partial shipment" is semantically related to the following sentence.

- Paragraph organization

Cohesion between sentences is the surface form. It is one section of discourse, but it is not the only characteristics of discourse. Paragraph semantic relation is a more important means to achieve discourse coherence. Specifically, this letter comprises three

sections: an opening sentence, a purpose message and a closing sentence. The opening sentence draws the reader's attention by mentioning that the letter has been received. The body of the letter goes from paragraph 2 to paragraph 4, which centers round the same matter to be settled. Paragraph 2 first points out the error made in the L/C; paragraph 3 gives explanation to the need for amending the L/C; paragraph 4 puts forward a reasonable suggestion for amendment. The closing sentence expresses sincere wish for accepting the suggestion. We can observe a clear Problem-Solution Pattern in the outline of this correspondence, which is structurally and logically coherent as a whole. In a word, the writer arranges each paragraph's idea in a logical order based on the topic and the communicative purpose.

IV. TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

Firstly, to understand the characteristics of business English correspondence is the basis for this type of writing. In terms of vocabulary, the words in business English correspondence are generally precise and formal [3]. This is particularly evident when it comes to business documents concerning time, price and mutual responsibilities. Moreover, specific terminology is often used in business English correspondence [4], such as quotation, draft, commission, and so forth. In terms of syntactical feature, a variety of fixed sentence structures in business English correspondence are used, such as "We shall be pleased if you would...", "We would request you to...", and "Will you please..." [5]. In terms of discourse feature, business English correspondence is generally short and its structure is also simple. It conveys the precise information in the most concise way, which reflects the economy of language. Therefore, in the teaching of business English correspondence writing, the teacher can provide students with sample writings and analyze the vocabulary, structures and styles of the samples, so that students can grasp the writing skills.

Secondly, the teacher can create some real business writing situations for students. For instance, the teacher can cooperate with a foreign trade company. Suppose the students start to work in the company, where they are required to write a series of business English correspondence ranging from the enquiry letter to the claim letter [6]. The theme-based writing can be advocated throughout the teaching practice so that students can get acquainted with the writing methods of business English correspondence and thus realize its communicative purpose.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper first gives the definition of discourse analysis and then introduces its two key concepts: cohesion and coherence. It then uses the coherence

principle as the theoretical framework and provides sample analyses. From the case study we can get the idea that business English correspondence is a highly-cohesive text. Many cohesive devices can be used to analyze it. It should also be noted that a good understanding of business English correspondence is based on background knowledge because many professional expressions are used in it. By examining how cohesive devices work in business English correspondence, the author attempts to give some hints on how to write orderly, uniform and logic business English correspondence. Hopefully, more fruitful researches will be conducted to reveal application of discourse theories to business English discourse. This paper only explores one perspective of discourse theory and more issues for future research should be identified.

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