

How to Write Polite English for Contemporary International Business Correspondence

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Abstract—English for contemporary international business correspondence is an extremely important tool to do business with foreign merchants. It should be noted that the politeness principles should be strictly observed in English for contemporary international business correspondence to make the letter concise and pleasant to the reader to settle any problem. Through a comprehensive and systematic analysis and comparison of examples, this paper argues that we should use certain ways to write polite English for contemporary international business correspondence.

Index Terms—English for international business correspondence, polite, wording, you-viewpoint, unity and coherence, tact

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of the economy, business communication skills in the economic trade exchanges between countries seem particularly important. The success of foreign trade depends to a great degree on the use of the language. A good business letter should be able to obtain its writer expected results, since during the business communication, both parties have to cooperate as well as compete against each other, and either party would endeavor to win the most possible profit while maintaining cooperation. So it is indispensable for either party to employ proper politeness principles in gaining advantages over the other. When business negotiation escalates into conflict, each party should tactfully use the politeness principles to show the other party his/her friendliness, deference or considerateness, to play down the imposition, to try to avoid the risk of face threatening acts and leave freedom for oneself to act. Undoubtedly, this goal cannot be achieved without a strategic use of language. Business letters are the most traditional and common means to help people exchange information, maintain friendship, negotiate and settle disputes. Since English is the most widely used language in the world, business letters written in English have become an indispensable part of business transactions.

A large part of international business is conducted by means of correspondence; therefore it is of the utmost importance for us to learn to write good business letters—letters that present ideas interestingly and clearly to enable readers to understand with the least possible effort.

II. APPROACHES TO WRITING POLITE ENGLISH FOR CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE

Early in the 60s of the 20th century, the American philosopher Grice said that to ensure the success of a conversation, both sides of the conversation should comply with some principles. The users of the language in communication should always have the desire to cooperate with each other and observe four maxims of good communicative behavior:

H.P Grice proposes that talking is purposive and rational behavior and this makes it possible through the Cooperative Principle to “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice,1975, P.45). That is to say, people engaged in conversation will say something suitable at that point in the development of talk. Grice has made CP somewhat more explicit by subdividing it into a set of conversational maxims and sub maxims. These maxims are expressed as follows:(1) The maxim of Quantity. Make your contribution as informative as is required. Do not make your contribution more informative than that is required.(2) The maxim of Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true. Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say the words for which you lack adequate evidence. (3) The maxim of Relevance: Be relevant. (4) The maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous. Avoid obscurity of expression. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). Be orderly.

From above we can see these four maxims appoint what speakers have to do in their utterance communication. They should speak honestly, relevantly and clearly, and provide competent information in their talking. The British linguist Leech thinks that in every communicative conversation, both the speaker and the listener should “maximize the expression of the polite beliefs” and “minimize the expression of impolite beliefs”. The politeness principle is very important to English for contemporary international business correspondence for everybody has to maintain each other’s face and avoid face-threatening acts. If the speaker wants his face to be given and also the other’s face to be cared for, the best way is to adopt proper politeness strategies, using appropriate polite language.

Business letters are conversations between the writer and the reader. Courtesy is the best policy in business correspondence. By abiding by the politeness principles, we can use the following ways to write polite English for contemporary international business correspondence.

1. Sexist language is to be avoided.

Gender bias should not appear in English for contemporary international business correspondence especially when the reader is a woman, either a feminist or not. Otherwise, it may offend or irritate the reader. In the past in business letter, the courtesy title Mrs. was used for a married woman and Miss for an unmarried woman. In recent years it has become customary to use Ms. As the courtesy title for all women, married or unmarried, and many women, particularly career women, strongly object to being addressed as Mrs. or Miss. We use neutral words rather than sexist language such as businesspeople or dealers instead of businessmen, salespeople instead of salesmen, spouses instead of wives. For example:

The workshop is especially useful to businesspeople.

Employees and their spouses are excluded from the contest.

2. Simple English is used

Time is money and a commodity for merchants. Therefore our letters should be written in simple English in order that the readers will understand them in least possible time. Grice's four maxims can be widely applied to English for contemporary international business correspondence. It is of much convenience for the reader to read simple, short but clear and complete business letters.

1) Concise polite formula is to be used

In order to make the reader understand easily and be glad to accept our information, letters are to be written in simple but courteous phrases such as we thank you, we would like you, we are glad/pleased, we have pleasure, we would be grateful/ obliged/appreciated if etc. Obsolete expressions that are hard to understand such as your esteemed favour (your letter), we have for acknowledgement with thanks shall be avoided (we have received your letter). For example:

We thank you for your letter of June 18 and have pleasure to inform you that the catalogue you asked for has been airmailed under separate cover.

We would like you to inquire into the financial and credit status of a firm in Milan on our behalf.

We would be obliged/grateful/appreciated/pleased if you would let us know if the company is reliable in paying debts, and also if they pay promptly

2) Familiar, conversational words and expressions are used.

Familiar, conversational words and expressions instead of complicated words or obsolete commercial jargons are used in order to make them understood more easily. For example:

familiar, conversational words and expressions	complicated or obsolete words and expressions
after	subsequent
large	substantial
issue	promulgate
if	in the event of
before	prior to
can	be in a position to
daily	per diem
during	in the course of
we enclose	enclosed herewith please
end	terminate
use	utilize
soon	in the near future
now/at present	at the present time
decide	come to a decision
you	your goodself
according to	as per

Careful writers should try to improve the quality of their letters by avoiding the difficult obsolete words or expressions.

3) Simple and short sentences and paragraphs are used

Use simple and short sentences and paragraphs, and finish with one point before going on to another to say what has to be said and say it clearly and completely. The crucial point is the aim of the letter must be made clear so that the reader will have no doubt about our intentions. For example:

Letter 1

As requested, we are sending you herewith our Proforma Invoice No.190 in quadruplicate for shirts.

The above-mentioned invoice, however, does not imply unreserved acceptance of your order as both prices and quantities must be further confirmed by us.

As soon as you have obtained the necessary import license, please let us know by e-mail so that we may confirm our offer. In the meantime, if there is any change in price or delivery, we shall contact you.

We look forward to receiving further views from you.

Grice's four maxims are applied very well in this letter. Every word, sentence and paragraph is appropriately used clear, complete, relevant and orderly without any redundancy. It will not be time-consuming for time is money to merchants.

3. Wording is to be noted

If our wording in the letter is inappropriate, the reader will be offended and displeased and unsatisfied so as to prevent the trade going smoothly. For example:

We sincerely **advise** you to accept our proposal as our stocks are getting lower and lower day and day, and we are afraid we shall be unable to meet your requirements if you fail to let us have your confirmation by return.

Here the wording *advise* is improperly used, which is used in a commanding tone as if the other party, who will be offended, had no choice but to accept our requirements, which will lead to the failure of the transaction. Therefore we should change the word *advise* into *recommend*.

We **reject** your order No.85 for 100,000 yards of Cotton Prints Art.No.1002.

Here the wording *reject* is inappropriate, which is too straightforward, which will make the other party lose face. We should express the sentence in a more euphemistic way by saying: *Unfortunately, we have been unable to accept your order No.85 for 100,000 yards of Cotton Prints Art.No.1002.*

The Agreement in question calls for your working out business to the amount of \$.... in going through our records, however, we find that your business done to date amounts to only \$..., **your failure** is obviously at variance with your undertakings set forth in the above-mentioned Agreement. Therefore, we hope that you will spare no efforts to strive for more business to carry out the provisions of the Agreement as expected of you.

Here *your failure* should be changed into *the inactivity on your part*.

4. Subjunctive mood is used

Subjunctive mood is used to make the sentence more gracious to leave much room for negotiation to reach the agreement. For example:

If another instance of this discrepancy between the sample and the goods received should occur, it would be very embarrassing.

If the quantity were not so large, we could not give you such high discounts.

Could you also supply samples of the various skins of which the gloves are made, we should find it most hopeful.

5. Vague language is used

Vague language is used to leave room to negotiate with the other party and for both parties to compromise for mutual benefits. For example:

We take the liberty of writing to you with a view to establishing business relations with you and meanwhile asking you to make us a **competitive offer** for 50 metric tons of Bitter Apricon Kernels, September shipment, together with your trade terms and conditions.

We are large dealers in textiles and believe there is a promising market in our area for **moderately priced** goods of the kind mentioned.

If your answer is in the affirmative, please quote us your **best price** CIF..., stating the earliest date of shipment and the discount you will allow. 4. Provided **prices are right**, we should place a first order for 400 raincoats, namely 100 raincoats each of the four qualities. To be candid with you, we like your raincoats, but your price appear to be on the high side as compared with those of other makes.

It **seems** to us that the firm's difficulties were due to bad management and in particular to overtrading.

We have so far not received your L/C though you promised to establish it immediately after the signing of the S/C.

We wonder if there is something in the way that precludes you from establishing the L/C.

Enclosed is a copy of the draft. Please go over the provisions and **advise us whether they meet with your approval**. We shall do all in our power to assist you in establishing a mutually beneficial trade.

6. You-viewpoint is used

When writing the business letter, we should remember whom we shall write to in order to view the problem in his light, take his circumstances into consideration, understand his difficulties and stand for him to show that we know him and we are considerate to him. For example:

We-viewpoint	You-viewpoint
.You have not opened the L/C for your order, which has been ready for shipment for a long time. We have written to you several times, but much to our regret, we have not had any reply from you up to the moment.	The goods you ordered have been ready . Please let us know when we can expect to receive the covering L/C, upon receipt of which, we will effect shipment without delay.
We regret to say that we have to cancel your order because of your failure to open the L/C in time.	Please let us know if there is something in the way that precludes you from establishing the L/C.
You did not open the L/C according to the contract terms; therefore you are requested to amend the L/C as follows:	There are some discrepancies existing between the L/C stipulations and the terms of contract. For smooth effectuation of shipment, we shall appreciate your amending the L/c as follows:

Obviously you –viewpoint presentation sounds better. The above expressions show that the seller has taken into consideration the benefits or difficulties of the buyer and suggests a possible settlement, thus encouraging the buyer to cooperate more closely with the seller. In our letter we should see things from the reader's point of view, visualize him in his surroundings, see his problems and difficulties and express our ideas in terms of his experience.

7. Business letters should be written clearly, completely and dated concretely to avoid ambiguity and vagueness. For example:

We have duly received your order, for which please accept our thanks. We can change this sentence into:

We have duly received your order No. 60 dated 22nd March, for which we thank you very much.

Your letter of recent date to hand and contents noted with thanks. We shall appreciate a line from you at an earliest date. We can change this sentence into:

We thank you for your letter of 14th April; and we shall appreciate your writing us soon.

8. Unity and coherence should be noted in the writing

For unity, a paragraph for each point is a good rule; likewise, one letter for one topic will serve to make our letter clear.

If a letter is coherent, the sentences stick together and each sentence is in some way linked to the preceding sentences. Careful writers use coherence techniques to avoid abrupt change in thought. For example:

Letter 2

Messrs. Brown & Clark of this city inform us that you are exporters of all cotton bed-sheets and pillowcases. We would like you to send us details of your various ranges, including sizes, colors and prices, and also samples of the different qualities of material used.

We are large dealers in textiles and believe there is a promising market in our area for moderately priced goods of the kind mentioned.

When replying, please state your terms of payment and discount you would allow on purchases of quantities of not less than 100 dozen of individual items. Process quoted should include insurance and freight to Liverpool.

This letter is a case in point. The first paragraph shows from whom the writer knows the addressee, and what the addressee requires. The second paragraph is a self-introduction and informs the addressee of the business prospects. The third paragraph is asking for terms of payment and quantity discount. So when writing is coherent, reading is simplified.

If a sentence or a paragraph contains a series, each element in the series can be placed a number before it.

For example: We require your draft to be accompanied by

1) three non-negotiable copies of clean shipped on board Bill of Lading, marked "Freight prepaid";

2) Signed Invoice in triplicate;

3) Certificate of Origin in duplicate;

4) Insurance Policy in duplicate covering WPA& War for full invoice value plus 10%

9. Proper voice should be used

1) Passive voice is used

If the doer of the action is the reader, we'd better use passive voice.

Using passive tense will make the tone more tactful. Ashley thinks: "In business letters, besides choosing some tactful language, we also ought to use passive tense in order to make letters more polite. Because passive tense can make your request much more mildly ..." (GuYueguo, 1992, P. 10-17) For example:

You made a very careless mistake. It should change into:

A very careless mistake was made.

You did not enclose the cheque with your order. It's better to change into:

The cheque was not enclosed with your order.

For the past two years, you did not give us any order. It's better to change into:

For the past two years, no order has been given to us

8. Tactful skills are used

2) Active voice is used

If the doer of the action is us, we'd better use active voice. By using active voice it seems that we are close to the reader thus leading to closer relationship between the writer and the reader.

Enclosed is our latest catalogue for your reference.

It is better to write: We enclose our latest catalogue for your reference.

A cable was sent by us to ABC Company yesterday.

It is better to write: We sent a cable to ABC Company yesterday.

Your enquiry of 20th August has been received and your interest in our products is appreciated. It is better to write: We have received your enquiry of 20th August and thank you for your interest in our products.

10. Tactful skills are used

When there exist some defects in our goods and services that should be corrected, special attention should be paid to the fact that our adjustment letters are to express our desire to build goodwill to keep negatives from worsening the situation. Therefore when making a direct claim, we should make clear what is wrong, not let the anger show and at the same time avoid sarcasm in the writing, give the facts calmly, specifically and thoroughly, request the action of a replacement, repair, refund, or compensation, be sure that the letter would not arouse resentment and offence; so the

tone and wording of the letter must be right. When dealing with a claim, we should begin pleasantly with the adjustment and avoid any grudging tone and disappointing aspects, and explain any facts fully and honestly and reassuringly including a goodwill-building sentence saying that we welcome the customer's comments as a way of making improvement. The reason for the mishap is to be stated briefly. We should admit the error frankly if the product or the company's service was at fault and ask for any necessary cooperation from the customer. The letter should be closed with a forward look. Do not repeatedly recall or apologize for the disappointing aspects with a backward look. End the letter with assurance and desire for future development.

As an adjustment communicator, we should avoid as possibly as we can the following words and expressions in the writing because they will ruin good will: your claim, amazed, fault, sorry, defective, surprised, and regret. More often than not, as a token of considerateness when closing a successful adjustment letter, we would say "If you have any more difficulty, please do not hesitate to let us know," or even "We do not think you will have any more difficulty." In fact, these words, to a great extent, create in the mind of the customer an undesirable idea that more difficulty will arise. Therefore, it is advisable to omit them. For example:

Letter 3

We duly received the documents and took delivery of the goods on arrival of the s. s. "Isabella" at Hamburg.

We are much obliged to you for the prompt execution of this order. Everything appears to be correct and in good condition except in case No.71.

Unfortunately, when we opened this case we found it contained completely different articles, and we can only presume that a mistake was made and the contents of this case were for another order.

As we need the articles we ordered to complete deliveries to our new customers, we must ask you to arrange for the dispatch of replacements at once. We attach a list of the contents of case No. 71, and shall be glad if you will check this with our order and the copy of your invoice.

In the meantime we are holding the above-mentioned case at your disposal; please let us know what you wish us to do with it.

Letter 4

Thank you for your letter of February 10 informing us that the consignment was delivered promptly, we appreciate your straightforwardness in pointing out that case No. 71 did not contain the goods you ordered.

On going into the matter we find that a mistake was indeed made in the packing through a confusion of numbers, and we have arranged for the right goods to be dispatched to you at once. Relative documents will be mailed as soon as they are ready.

We have already cabled to inform you of this, and we enclose a copy of the telegram.

Please keep case No. 71 and its contents until called for by our Commercial Counselor's Office, whom we have informed of the matter accordingly.

We were sorry for the trouble caused you by the error and wish to assure you that care will be taken in the execution of your further orders.

Letter 3 and Letter 4 are good examples. The first and the second paragraphs of Letter 3 imply a buffer by praising the seller or exporter for having executed the order promptly. The third paragraph simply gives the fact. The last two paragraphs submit suggestions for a fair settlement of the trouble.

A tactful adjustment letter will often ease the anxiety of the claimant who feels annoyed at the inconvenience caused him by the mishap, thus making settlement easy to reach. The first paragraph of Letter4 expresses appreciation to the customer for pointing out that wrong goods have been delivered. The second paragraph gives the reason for the mistake and informs the customer that actions for settlement have been taken. The fourth paragraph is a suggestion. The last paragraph, besides expressing regret, stresses assurance that care will be taken in the execution of the customer's future orders. In handling cases such as this, arguments will not ease the customers of their anxieties, while fair play proves to be the acceptable solution.

This kind of ways of wording and paragraphing is good to make the letter clear and readable and pleasant to be accepted.

III. CONCLUSION

Polite English for contemporary international business correspondence creates an atmosphere to respect and cooperate with the reader to make him willing and glade to cooperate with us so as to help us promote our friendship and expand trade. Respecting others is respecting oneself. We should do our utmost to make our business letters polite to make the deal go smoothly. In business letters we should maximize the expression of the polite beliefs and minimize the expression of impolite beliefs. Slight carelessness may ruin our trade for the competition in the foreign trade is increasingly fierce with the rapid globalization of the economy. So the politeness principles should be automatically conformed to and politeness cannot be overemphasized in English for contemporary international business correspondence.

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