

On Pragmatic Functions of Hedges in English Business Letters

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Using hedges in English business letters is a common phenomenon. The purpose of the research of the pragmatic functions of hedging in English business letters is to prove that using hedges appropriately can make business communication more accurate, more flexible, more polite, and more effective. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part describes the current research and the theoretical basis; the second part mainly discusses the use of hedges in business English letters; the third part discusses the reasons and pragmatic functions of hedges in English business letters; and on the basis of this, the writer gets the conclusion that hedges using can be beneficial to business translation and negotiations.

Keywords: hedges, business English letters, pragmatic functions

Identification and Classification of Hedges

It is a hard work to give any kind of list of hedges, because hedges may be basically from an open ended classification. Even it is difficult to show an accurate definition of hedging and include all kinds of hedges, we must have something as standard to chose as the expression from the data. We chose the use of modal verbs, for “may, might, would, could” and so on; we chose the use of “modifiers, for plausible or probably”; we chose the use of framing expression, for “it is unlikely that...” and so on. We chose apologizing for the face act, for “I hope those working faults will forgive me for not describing the results fully”. All the words or expressions appeared in business English letters were chosen as the sample letters.

Hedges can be divided into: changes in the adaptors of hedges, changes in the bounders of hedges, plausibility shields of hedges, attribution shields of hedges (Zadeh, 1965). The first one is the adaptors of hedges. This class has changed the conditions for a true value proposition to adjust the degree of the adaptors of discourse, which means in line with the specific situation. The second one is the bounders of hedges. This class gives a proposition of a specific range, which means speak but not make any mistakes in this range. The third one is the plausibility shields of hedges. This class indicates that speaker made directly to something, and skeptical of the proposition. The last one is the attribution shields of hedges. That means to borrow a third party to view and convey the attitude of discourse information, even sometimes the speaker may have the same idea with the author.

Hedges is an important member of the vague language family. Fuzzy phenomena exist nearly in every aspect of human life. And it is also a feature of language. Hedges is a part of vague language and widely used in business English letters.

Practical Application of Hedges

The application study of hedges in China involves many fields such as literary works, legal discourse, business letters, news discourse, foreign language teaching, and so on. Kang Xiangying (2008) and some other scholars probed the interpersonal relationships built by hedges in literary works and found that hedges can not only make utterance more appropriate, but also reflect the power relationship between two sides of communication and portray the characteristics of figures. Moreover, the use of hedges can strengthen the contagiousness of language and reflect the author's rigorous attitude and self-protection awareness. With the rise of corpus linguistics, many domestic scholars discussed the pragmatic functions of hedges in academic discourse, negotiation discourse, news discourse, and other practical discourses by self-built corpora. Li Li (2012) and Zeng Xiaolin (2015) made an analysis on hedges in economical news report from China Daily in order to get the reasons and functions of fuzzy words. Xu Jiang, Zheng Li, and Zhang Haiming (2014) contrastively studied the use of hedges in English scientific research articles in the journal *Nanotechnology* written by Chinese mainland scholars and native scholars based on self-built corpora. Duan Shiping (2016) analyzed the hedges and their functions in English teaching, and believed that the pragmatic value of hedges in English teaching should be fully developed. Teachers should use the hedges tactfully to create a good atmosphere in the classroom and instruct students to learn to use hedges appropriately in order to improve their expression and communication skills.

Frequencies of Hedges in Eight Types of Business English Letters

The frequencies of hedging in nearly each of the eight types of business English letters are supposed to be very different; it goes as follows:

Frequency of hedging in sales letters: The reason for using hedges is due to the writing purpose of the type of business English letter. Sales letters are forwarded to the customers for the purpose of "attracting their attention, holding their interest, arousing their desire, and inducing their action to purchase goods".

Frequency of hedging in inquiry letters: Inquiry letter is forwarded to show the addresser's interests in different products. And a brief introduction may be given to the addresser according to the business status. Employing too many hedges may make the addressers feel that they are not sincere enough. While showing too much interest in the products may cause disadvantage to him in the following negotiations. So, hedging in inquiry letter is less frequently used than in sales letter.

Frequencies of hedging in re-inquiry letters: It is a reply to the inquiry letter, where the seller expresses his thanks to the buyer's inquiry letter and gives an introduction to his business status and information about the products. Inquiry letter and re-inquiry letter often goes in pairs, but it is very obvious that there are more hedges using in the inquiry letter than those in the re-inquiry letter.

Frequency of hedging in offer letters: An offer letter is a promise to sell goods at a negotiated price, usually including a stated period of time. In addition, an exact description of the products should be given and, if possible, sample may be sent. It is to be noted that an offer although may not legally binding, but an offer is capable of acceptance and once it has been accepted, it can not be withdraw, and the transact should be in strict consistence with the conditions prescribed in the offer. The language in the offers and counters should be very clear while prescribing the business conditions. However, it does not mean that hedging should be excluded from this part of business letters absolutely.

Frequency of hedging in counter-offer letters: In counter-offer, the buyers express their dissatisfaction with certain items of business conditions, and also propose some changes about these items. While expressing dissatisfaction, hedging is a useful tool for the addresser, because it could make the language not so imposing. While requesting the seller to adjust certain items of this business conditions, the buyers also tend to use hedges to make their requests more courteous, and these grants may have more chances for their requests to be accepted.

Frequency of hedging in order letters: Once the buyer decides to accept the offer putted forward by the seller, he is going to place an order with him. In the order letter, the buyer will state his satisfaction toward the quality of the products and the business conditions proposed by the seller firstly. Secondly, the buyer will specify the name of the goods, qualities, mode of shipment, terms of payment, prices, and some other important information. The order letter is legally binding, that means that, all the following business behaviors should be done in strict consistence according to the stipulation in the order letter. It is therefore of great importance to reduce the using of vague expressions to its minimum while specifying the important items in business conditions. It does not mean that all the vague expressions should be excluded.

Frequency of hedging in complaint letters: Complaint letters are usually forwarded to sellers to show the buyer's dissatisfaction with the products that they have received, for example, wrong delivery, or poor quality, or late arrival, and some damages occurring to the goods. Some possible solutions are also put forward by the addresser in this type of business English letters. The adjustment letter is forwarded to the buyer as an explanation of the problems may be based on his investigation. The language in these two types of letters should not be so aggressive or offensive, even while expressing their discontent. At the same time, in order to show their dissatisfaction, the addressers sometimes use hedges to strengthen the tone. For this purpose, hedges are used frequently to be adopted in this two types of letters.

Frequency of hedging in adjustment letters: Adjustment letter is used to reply to complaints from the buyers, in which the sellers may express his apologies to the buyers and promise to handle it up, or refuse to the addresser's requests in a courteous way. Hedging is also used in both reactions in these letters.

Pragmatic Functions of Hedges in Business English Letters

One of the reasons of using hedges in business letters is that hedges can play some pragmatic functions to make letters more flexible, appropriate, and polite. So the analysis of the pragmatic functions of hedging in business English letters is significant. Here follows some functions in eight types of business English letters.

Pragmatic functions of sales letter: Politeness is the most common function of hedging in sales letter and so does the persuasiveness, self-protection, and deliberateness. The common use of "politeness" is due to the writing purpose of the sales letter. The purpose of sales letter is to promote the selling or to establish a relationship, so the language used in the letter should be very polite and persuasive. In this way can it be possible for the addressers to achieve their aims.

Pragmatic functions of hedging in inquiry letters: The universality of the function of hedging in inquiry letter is the same with those in the sales letter. The writing purpose of inquiry is to show the addresser's interests in the products, in which a brief introduction was followed to the addresser's interests and persuasiveness to show the addresser's status. At the same time, showing too much interests in the goods may cause disadvantage to him in the coming negotiations, so the addresser may deliberately withhold some secret information.

Pragmatic functions of hedging in re-inquiry letter: When the sellers express their thanks, their words are very polite, and while they introduce their products, they employ some persuasive words to attract the buyer so that there will be more probability for the buyer to purchase their products. So, the “politeness” function is very important in re-inquiry letter.

Pragmatic functions of hedging in offer letter: The writing purpose of offer letter is to show the high good quality and salability of the products to the addressee, so the addresser used a lot persuasive words to show the high quality of their products. In this way, the buyer may not probably put forward counter-offers, which is of course the expectation of the addresser. None of the hedges has been used in offer letters which have the function of this kind.

Pragmatic functions of hedging in counter-offer: In counter-offer letter, the buyers express their dissatisfaction with certain items of business conditions, and propose some changes to these items. While expressing dissatisfaction, polite words were usually used by the seller since it could make the language not so imposing. While requesting the sellers to adjust certain items of business conditions, buyers also tend to use polite words to make his request more courteous, and this grants more chances for their requests to be accepted.

Pragmatic functions of hedging in order letter: In the order letter, the buyer always first states his satisfaction toward the quality of the goods and the business conditions proposed by the seller. When the buyer expresses his satisfaction, he uses polite words in order to establish good relation between the two parties.

Pragmatic functions of hedging in complaint letter: A complaint letter is usually forwarded to sellers to show the buyers’ dissatisfaction with the goods that they have got. At the same time, some possible solutions are also forwarded by the addresser in this kind of business letter. But the language in this type of letter should not be aggressive or offensive, even while expressing the discontent, so some polite words are used. But in order to show their dissatisfaction, the addressers sometimes used persuasive words to make the addresser believe that this discontent was serious.

Pragmatic functions of hedging in adjustment letter: An adjustment letter is the reply to the complaint letter from the buyer, in which the seller may express his apology to the buyer and promise to make it up, or may refuse the addresser’s request in courteous way, so both the polite words and persuasive words are very important, and this can also be proved. That is to say, in an adjustment letter, the addresser deliberately withholds some different information in order to make the whole more flexible.

Conclusion

According to what we have explored above and the main findings of what we analyzed, some practical suggestions could be given for those authors who compose business English letters, for those teachers who teaching business English, and for those students who are interested in hedges. According to this analysis, we know that hedging plays a very important role in business communication. But it has weakness, so business persons should learn to choose the best choice to achieve their goals. Nowadays, the study only focuses on a few aspects of hedging in business English letters, leaving a lot of other aspects undiscovered. Firstly, it is very important to do a research on hedging in other types of business English letters. Secondly, it is very important to do a research on hedging in Chinese letters. Thirdly, it is also important to do a research on business contracts, or business negotiations, and so on. Hedging in business English letters are the result of linguistic choices. It is

adapted to be the addressers' communicative purposes, politeness motivation, and also cooperation motivation. It is very obvious to find that hedging in business English letters may benefit the addressers a lot by making the language more polite and persuasive, which also can protect them from being later proved to be wrong, and withholding some informations. It could help the addressers to achieve their communicative purposes in a way. As we know that we collect the sample letters just from some textbooks, so the corpus is not so serious. Only eight sample letters are selected for this type of business English letters. Due to that, it may affect the truth of the result. Secondly, all the letters are selected from business English letters notebooks and they are published in China. Thirdly, business English letters are classified according to different functions. Lastly, this paper is carried out through data analysis, but it is subjective. We need more scientific ways to be used in the future.

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