Language Features of Business English Correspondence from the Perspective of Memetics

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Abstract: As an effective means of business communication, business English correspondence plays an important role in international business communication. It is an effective medium for countries to communicate with each other, conduct business and establish cooperative partnerships. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to improve the writing ability of business English correspondence in order to promote more efficient written business communication. Memetics is an emerging theory to explain the law of human cultural evolution based on Darwinian theory of evolution, with the core concept of the term "meme". Memes are closely related to language, and language is a form of memes. Business English is a special form of language, so memetics can help us deeply understand the language of business English correspondence from a new perspective and inspire a new way of thinking to learn correspondence writing.

1. Introduction

Business English correspondence is the written form of the communication, which is applied in every procedure of the business activities, referring to correspondence between traders in professional trade English in the economic activities of foreign trade. In view of its significance in business activities, many scholars have studied business English correspondence. However, up till now, there are few studies of business English correspondence from the perspective of language memetics, which still needs to be further expanded.

Memes exist in every component of business English correspondence. Language memes in Business English correspondence can be copied and transmitted in two ways: genotype ("same content but different forms") and phenotype ("same form and different contents").[1] In the process of replication and transmission, memes go through four subsequent stages: assimilation, retention, expression and transmission. In each stage, memes are restricted by the memes selection mechanism, and only those that conform to the selection mechanism can continuously replicate and spread themselves. In addition, this paper puts forward a model of business English correspondence writing from the perspective of memetics.

2. Features of Successful Memes

As we know, in his book *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins (1976) thinks that not all genes can replicate do so successfully, so some memes are more successful in the memes pool than others and

some are eliminated from minds.[2] But in general, only some successful memes will be spread and replicated, which meet three conditions: copying-fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. So, the author will explain them in the following.

(1) Copying-fidelity: This means that during the process of replication, it can transmit its accurate meaning or ideas to others from the core of the scientific concept, but it may not be copied correctly as it was originally. In order to achieve that function, the concept will change to some degree except for the concept of the soul. It doesn't have 100 percent accuracy.

(2) Fecundity: This means that memes with strong ability to replicate, can spread quickly and widely. For example, some popular songs like "Hey Jude" are repeated and spread by hundreds of thousands of people. The higher the replication frequency, the more replicators will be transferred. In addition, if people accept the certain value of those memes, people will be happy to transmit them to others. It's only when memes exist, it can talk about longevity. Thus, we can say that the abundance of memes is more significant than longevity and copying-fidelity.

(3) Longevity: This means it has a long-term preservation during the process of replication and translation. Some successful memes have a strong ability be preserved and spread on paper or in the human brain for a long time. The time they stay in the memes pool longer, the opportunities to be replicated and spread will be more. Information can be sustained continuously in the forms of magazines, books, photos, songs, etc.

Because these three features are closely linked, memes fit three features has more chances to be strong memes. Among them, fecundity is the most important factor because it affects the copying-fidelity is high or low, providing lots of repetition and extending the entire life cycle. Additionally, longevity is an indispensable factor. It cannot be copied with high fidelity if it is lack of enough time to copy the memes. In short, successful memes carrying with these three features can ensure their survival to the utmost extent in fierce competition of memes pool.

3. Four Stages of Language Memes

Vaneechoutte & Skoyles (1998) said "Memes have a life-cycle that is like parasites". [3]A meme which is selected and accepted by a host, has to go through several stages in order to be replicated and redistributed by a new host. Heylighen (1998) suggests that memes must be replicated and disseminated throughout the entire life-cycle in order, including four subsequent phases: assimilation, retention, expression and transmission.[4] There is an inevitable selection at each stage, which poses a risk of wiping out some memes at every stages.

The first stage is assimilation of a meme. It's about whether a meme can attract a host's attention and enter his memory. In this way, assimilation means that the host can notice, understand and accept the presented meme. "Noticing" requires that the meme is able to gain the host's attention. "Understanding" means that the host later can make the meme representable in his or her own cognitive system. Not all ideas will be presented in human' minds. But only when a new idea fit within or connect with the host's original structure of cognitive system, it can be understood by the host. "Acceptance" means that the host takes the new meme seriously and believes it. For example, when you see an advertisement saying that this beauty product can make your skin white quickly within 3 days. Although this statement is easy to understand, no one believes it. Thus, this meme cannot manage to infect a host.

The second stage is retention of a meme. It's about how a meme can be retained in the host's memory for relatively long period of time. The meme has more chances to spread by holding other potential host's attention providing that it is kept in his or her minds as long as possible. Retention is referred to longevity, an indispensable feature for memes replicators. We will encounter many things in a day. However, only some successful memes can fortunately undergo strong selection and

be remembered for a long time, which are significant to or affect you and you repeat them from time to time.

The third stage is expression of a meme. It's the process of memes replication and communication concerning to infect other hosts. The commonly expression occur in the ways of behaviors, speech, pictures, texts, walking, etc. If the host considers that the meme is uninteresting or doesn't know how to express it, then they won't express some memes forever. Conversely, the host can unconsciously share it with others again and again if the host views it as so important.

The fourth stage is transmission of a meme. It is to stably spread a meme to its next host through the expression's medium. At this stage, the memetic expression turns to be firm and visible physical forms, like photos, books and web pages.

In conclusion, these four subsequent stages constitute a meme's life-cycle that a successful meme must go through in the process of replication. Only some successful memes can survive under the strong selection in each stage, which possess the features of high copying-fidelity, strong fecundity and longevity. In contrary, those failing in the fierce competition will be forgotten and wiped out from our minds.

4. A General Introduction of BEC

Business English correspondence means all kinds of letters, faxes, memos and emails, which provides great convenience for foreign business communication and cooperation between countries. It is a professional written communication, covering many contents such as inquiries, offers, package, insurance, claims, arbitration, etc.

Since the advent of trade, business English correspondence have always existed, copied and transmitted from generation to generation through imitation. Thus, there are distinctive language memes in business English letters.

Due to the importance of having a clear concept of the composition of a business English correspondence, the author will firstly introduce its components and layouts before analyzing the memetic phenomenon in BEC.

4.1 Components of BEC

In a typical business English correspondence, there are seven basic parts detailed as follows: the letterhead, date line, inside name and address, salutation, body of the letter, complimentary close and signature.

First, the letterhead refers to the name and address of the firm that writes the letter, including the phone number, fax number, e-mail address, etc. Some of them also carry the company logo.

Second, the date line includes the date, month, and year. It's generally written in one line.

Third, the inside name and address refers to the name, title and address of firm that receives the letter.

Fourth, the salutation refers to the customary formal greeting, like *Dear Sir*/*Dear Madam* used to address one person whose name remains unknown.

Fifth, the main body of the letter consists of three sections, the opening paragraph, the specific content and the closing paragraph.

Sixth, the complimentary close is a polite way of ending a letter, and it always matches the formal salutation, which is equivalent to the meaning of "Yours".

Seventh, the signature mainly includes the company's full name, handwritten signature, typed name and its business title.

In addition, some business English correspondence may includes one or more optional parts, such as the attention line, subject line, identifying initials, enclosure notation and copy notation.

4.2 Layouts of BEC

The layout of the letters is to arrange their parts according to common formats or styles, including how to use spacing of the page to center the letters. At present, there are three main formats for writing business letters, namely, full-block, indented, and modified.

In the full-block style, each element is arranged from the left margin, so the left side of the entire letter is a vertical line. No space is required for the first sentence of each paragraph, but there are one or two lines between paragraphs. In the indented style, the first line of each paragraph of the text should be indented 4 spaces. The letterhead, endorsement signature and sender's name are all on the right or to the right, while the address and title in the envelope are on the left. If any of the above elements are to be arranged in separate lines, the back line must be indented by two or three English letters than the previous line. The most widely used one is the modified style, the positions of all other parts are the same as in the indented style, except that the first line of each paragraph should not be indented.

5. Manifestation of Memes in BEC

5.1 Genotype of Language Memes in BEC

5.1.1 The same Information Transmitted in the same Form

In the process of replication and dissemination, the original information has not changed, but the transmission of communication or the context has changed. Application and imitation are the most important communication channels of this type. It is reflected in all aspects of business English correspondence, such as writing principles, formats, syntax, discourse, writing ideas, etc. In addition, the 7C principle we adhered to in business correspondence is also an embodiment of this genotype. From a macro-perspective, the author conveys business information through the direct format, such as traditional full-block style, simple indented style, and modified style. The writing structure always includes the opening, actual message and closing. Regarding the basic form of the date, there is the following sequence: day/month/year or month/day/year. From the perspective of memetics, it turns out that the strong memes "Dear name" is mainly used as a salutation at the beginning of a letter, such as Dear Sir/sirs; Dear Madam. Its writing structure includes three parts. The opening tend to express thanks and mention the dates and approvals. The actual message is the main contents of a letter. The closing is to express hope of receiving a reply. The memes of "Yours sincerely" and "Best regards" are the most widely transmitted in the compliment closing for politely saying goodbye to the recipient. They are directly quoted in business English correspondence.

5.1.2 The same Information Transmitted in Various Forms

Memetics holds that memes can be spread vertically and progressively by mainly copying the content of the information. In a business English correspondence, it is mainly manifested through words and syntax. The lexical memes of business English correspondence reflects on various forms of abbreviations and homophones. Such as FOB means Freight on Board, ETA means Estimated Time of Arrival, FYI means For Your Information and D/A stands for Documents Against Acceptance. Homophones like Wt equals as Weight, PCs equals as Pieces and CEFT equals as certificate.

In complete business English correspondences, their opening sentences have many synonymous substitutions. Take "Thank you for your letter of..." "We acknowledge the receipt of your letter of..." "We are glad to receive your letter of..." as examples. The sentences like "We are looking forward to your early reply." or "Your early reply would be appreciated." often appears in the

closing sentences.

The phenomenon of polysemous words in business English correspondences is more prominent. For instance, the four words of shipment, delivery, dispatch and shipment have a common meaning, which means "to send a consignment". At the same time, it is also reflected in different sentences expressing the same meaning, such as the sentences expressing hope that the other party will handle insurance for the goods as the following: Please insure/ cover for us the following goods; Please insure/ cover us on the goods detailed below; Please hold us covered for/on the cargo listed on the attached sheet; Please effect/ arrange insurance for the goods. Besides, when urging the other party to open a letter of credit, we can say: Please expedite the establishment of the L/C to enable us to effect shipment; Please open the covering of L/C as soon as possible so that shipment may be effected without delay.

5.2 Phenotype of Language Memes in BEC

5.2.1 The Information Transmitted by Homophone

The language memes remain the same or similar pronunciation but replace the world in order to convey different meanings without changing the original structure. In business English correspondence, phenotype of language memes are mainly spread through Homograph and structural homonym. In other words, there is relative few samples for the information transmitted by homophone in the perspective of business English correspondence.

5.2.2 The Information Transmitted by Homograph

According to the memetics, the form and content of the language memes have not changed, but when applied to different occasions it will have different contexts of meaning. In the process of usage, there will be expansion in concept and transplantation or addition in meaning. For example, the word of "presentation" has the usual meaning of the activity of formally presenting something (as a prize or reward), but in business English correspondences it tends to express the meaning of the act of presenting something to sight or view. The usual meaning of "acceptance" is the mental attitude that something is believable and should be accepted as true, but in business English correspondences it relates to the meaning of a time draft drawn on and accepted by a bank, like bank's acceptance and document against acceptance. Average, which means h business correspondence, such as firm offer.

5.2.3 The information Transmitted by Structural Homonym

Under the theory of memetics, isomorphism and horizontal transplantation refer to the imitation of a specific language structure that remains largely unchanged to form a new memes variant. This transplantation is mainly manifested in the horizontal transplantation of concepts and sentences in business English correspondences. In the horizontal grafting of concepts, such as documentary L/C, irrevocable L/C, confirmed L/C, sight L/C and time L/C. In addition, it reflects in the aspect of payment like documents against payment at sight, documents against acceptance, and documents against payment after sight. The isomorphism and horizontal transplantation of sentence patterns, such as Enclosed please find us catalog and price list; Enclosed please find us commercial invoice; Enclosed please find us sample books, and also the sentences such as We have pleasure in making the following offer subject to your reply reaching here before the 15th January; We have pleasure in making the following offer subject to our confirmation upon receipt of your reply here by Friday morning our time; We have pleasure in making the following offer subject to your reply reaching us by October 10.

5.3 Four Stages of Language Memes in BEC

Heylighen (1998) believed that a successful meme should go through four stages, namely assimilation, retention, expression and transmission.[5] There is a selection criteria existing in each stage so not all the language memes are able to pass through the four stages. That is to say, only part of successful language memes that meet the selection criteria more, are more likely to be replicated and transmitted. In the following, the author will analyze the life cycle of language memes in business English correspondences to explore how the successful memes survive from those four stages.

In the first stage of life cycle, assimilation, the main selection criteria for memes are authority and formality. The authoritative language memes of business English correspondences can easily accepted by people so that the host will notice, understand and accept those language memes. Words and sentence structures in real business correspondences or business texts are easily accepted by people. For example, the abbreviation form of "cash on delivery" "COD" occurs very frequently in real business correspondence and the authoritative books, which has become a convention. It also includes the abbreviation form of "for your information" for "FYI". Thus, this kind of memes are more likely to assimilated by the host.

In the second stage of life cycle, retention, the main selection criteria for memes are invariance and usefulness. Invariance means that those memes occur continuously, and are independent of the mode of acceptance, have a greater chance of remaining in the memory of the host. Just take the placement of each component of business English correspondence as an example, they adjust to the convention regardless of any style. The unchangeable placement thus has a possibility to remain in the host's memory. At the same time, only the meme which is quite useful to the host, it will be easily stored in the host's memory and used efficiently. Every language meme contributes to some function so that it can be shown in the business English correspondence. For example, the sentences used in the opening sentences like "We thank you for the captioned order you place with us." "Thank you very much for your letter of April 22 and your order." "I am writing to you concerning Order No. GC0653/d which you placed." and "Thank you for your order which you faxed us yesterday." can remind the receiver that it's an acknowledgment letter for the order.

In the third stage of life cycle, expression, the main selection criteria for memes is expressivity. That is to say, the language memes stored in memory will emerge into a physical form. In the business activities, it often means that people communicate business affairs through the letters. As a consequence, the language memes of business English correspondence can be expressed by the written form, and also be noticed and perceived by some potential hosts.

In the fourth stage of life cycle, transmission, the main selection criteria for memes is publicity. It means the way that the meme is transmitted to the public, which is a visible and perceptible carrier. The carrier can be sound, books, photos, or even crafts. Authentic business correspondences, teaching classes related to BEC, books and teachers' explanations are native carriers for language memes of business English correspondences.

5.4 Implications for BEC Writing Learning

"English Business Correspondence Writing" draws on the structure, characteristics and system of business English, and closely combines China's actual foreign trade business with international business practice. We should learn to express the same information in different forms (genotype), and apply different content in the same form (phenotype). These genotype language memes are some typical formulas in business English correspondence. In addition, memes copying-fidelity proves importance of imitation. Applying imitation and paraphrase, we can study appropriate leaning materials that is interesting, practical and accepted, to quickly master these language memes

and apply these expressions flexibly in different contexts, transform the content to express the ideas they want to express, so as to avoid tedious sentence patterns and words. On one hand, from the perspective of memetics, in the process of selecting learning materials, it's learners themselves actively choose to master and control language memes to learn. Because these sentence patterns or phrases have become strong memes, which is constantly assimilated, stored, imitated and transmitted in learning and practice. On the other hand, from the perspective of memetics, it's reproducible imitation or creative imitation, with variation in reproduction.

Under the guidance of phenotype language memes, we need to grasp the general and extended meaning of words. In this way, if the same form and content of language memes are used in different occasions, students can easily control their meaning associations, which is benefit of understanding business English correspondence. It's helpful to use standard business English correspondence as a learning template, and learn and master it by filling in or reading and writing on the basis of others, which features at creation and imagination. According to different business scenarios, the learners activate various language memes stored in the memory, and directly applies, selects, associates, and grafts to communicate. The correct use of two types of language memes replication and transmission and its life cycle and features of strong memes is the key to effectively occur memetic effects.

6. Conclusion

The study analyzes language memes in business English correspondence under the guidance of memetics. Firstly, it's found that business English correspondences are like a small pool of memes, where the memes that live have their own characteristics. Language is the carrier of memetic information, and business English correspondence is one of the carriers of language memes. Secondly, based on previous studies on memes replication and transmission styles, this research analyzes two types of language memes replication and transmission in business English correspondence, the features of being a successful meme, and also proposes the selection criteria during the four stages of life cycle, which are all suitable for business English correspondence learning. Finally, the author emphasizes the significance of studying at appropriate materials and the method of imitation and paraphrase when learn to write business English correspondences. (Thanks to Ms Cui Xiaohua who has helped me a lot in the process of writing this article, such as including collecting and sorting data.)

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