

Realization of Textual Cohesion and Coherence in Business Letters through Presupposition¹

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Abstract

The study, based on the theory of textual function proposed by Halliday and Thompson, discusses how presupposition contributes to the textual cohesion and coherence in business letters through analysis of the sample letters randomly chosen from websites and textbooks. Presupposition refers to what is assumed by the speaker when uttering a specific sentence, as the mutual knowledge shared by both sides of the participants, is an evitable requirement for interpretation of the business letters. Textual cohesion and coherence ensure the smooth information flow of the discourse, so the reader could understand the business letter in a sufficient way. Presupposition contributes to the cohesion of the discourse in business letters through cohesive devices including reference, ellipsis and conjunction; textual coherence could be realized by presupposition for the common knowledge shared by the writer and the reader. The study recommends that presupposition can be widely used in English business writing and meet textual cohesion and coherence of the discourse.

Keywords: presupposition, textual cohesion, textual coherence, business letters

I. INTRODUCTION

With the development of international trade, business letters, letters used to deal with business activities by traders, have aroused the interests of research of many scholars, thanks to the important role English letters play in accelerating the cooperation between traders. Most of the previous studies focus on the lexical features, linguistic features and translation strategies of business letters. There are some discourse analyses on business letters based on the theory of systemic functional linguistics, but few of them study the textual cohesion and coherence of business letters realized by presupposition. The theoretical framework for the analysis of the sample letters in the present study is based on Halliday (1964) and Thompson's (2000) interpretation of textual cohesion and coherence.

From perspectives of pragmatics, presupposition refers to the inference assumed to be true but not that directly asserted to be true. Such kind

of inference is dependent on the actual linguistic structure of sentences and very sensitive to contextual factors. It is an aspect of meaning that must be understood by both sides of the participants and taken for granted for an utterance to make sense. Words and expressions considered as presupposition in an utterance should be accepted by both sides of the participants to guarantee a successful communication. According to Functional Grammar, cohesion mainly concerns how sentences and parts of the sentences relate to each other so as to ensure propositional development. Cohesion refers to the surface structure including the lexical and grammatical features which are visible in the discourse; while coherence concentrates on the logical and semantic relationships in a discourse.

The main function of business letter is to inform or remind the readers of a certain thing and persuade them to trust what is written. Thus, to achieve this purpose, the writer is required to use plain English but not literary words, so as to guarantee a clear understanding. However, besides a good command of stand modern English as well as all kinds of social knowledge and knowledge of technical terms, the writer need to know the basic writing principles which are known as the "seven Cs": completeness, concreteness, clearness, conciseness, courtesy, consideration, and correctness (Liao Ying, 2002:97-116).

Completeness here means that the letter should convey all the necessary information especially those questions and requirements put forward by the readers. Concreteness refers to the information conveyed in the letter which is specific, definite and vivid, especially the statement of data or some important information. Clearness means to be clear and easy to understand. Conciseness which is considered to be the most important feature of business letter means saying things as few words as possible. Courtesy means to be polite and friendly. Considerateness refers to write from the readers' viewpoint, known as the "you" attitude in business letters. Correctness, the basic requirement of a letter of good quality refers to what is written should be correct in grammar, spelling and punctuation.

The study was designed to investigate the textual function of presupposition in business letters in terms of textual cohesion and coherence, and how it helps to ensure the development of discourse in a required way, to satisfy the “seven Cs” principles of business letters, for the purpose of improving business letter writing and interpreting, so as to ensure the smooth flow of information, and also is expected to cast some light on the teaching and learning of business letter writing in schools.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The author adopts qualitative method to make an analysis of the textual cohesion and coherence of presupposition in business letter discourse. In the study, the author chose 60 business letters whose functions include establishing business relations, enquiry, quotation, negotiation, ordering, confirming order, payment, shipment, insurance, acknowledging goods receipt, claim as well as adjustment, etc, as the object of the research. Samples are selected randomly from the internet and several textbooks including International Business Letters and Documents published by Higher Education Press in 2006, Business English Correspondence published by University of International Business and Economics Press in 2008, Write That Letter published by Changchun Press in 2001, and English Business Letters published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in 2000. All the letters are numbered from sample 1 to sample 60, and all the examples shown in the following discussion include two or three successive sentences.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK— TEXTUAL COHESION AND COHERENCE

In his article The Linguistic Study of Literary Text, Halliday (1964) first put forward the concept “cohesion”, and then defined it in Cohesion in English in 1976. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976:4), “cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded by resource to it. When this happens, a relation of cohesion is set up, and the two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least integrated into a text.” As for coherence, Van Dijk (1988) proposes that “coherence is a semantic property of discourse, based on interpretation of each individual sentence relative to the interpretation of other sentences.” Debeaugrande and Dressler (1981) maintain that cohesion concerns the way in which the components of the surface text while coherence concerns the way in which the components of the textual world.

Halliday proposes four ways to create cohesion in English, and they are reference, ellipsis,

conjunction, and lexical cohesion, among which the former three are categorized as grammatical cohesion by Halliday and Hasan. This study just focuses on the grammatical cohesive devices—reference, ellipsis and conjunction, because they possess the distinct feature of presupposition.

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976:31), reference refers to certain language items, instead of being interpreted semantically in their own right, and they make reference to something else for their interpretation. Thompson (2000:149) claims that there are three main types of reference: personal reference, demonstrative reference and comparative reference. Personal reference refers to a kind of reference realized by personal pronouns including first pronouns, second pronouns and the third pronouns. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976:37), demonstrative reference is reference by means of location on a scale of proximity which is typically from the point of view of the writer, such as, this refers to something that is near to the writer. The third type of reference is comparative. “Any comparative attached to one entity or concept thus implies the existence of the other entity or concept.” (Thompson, 2000:151) Ellipsis is the omission of information that can be interpreted from the previous clause. “Sometimes an explicit indication may be given that something is omitted, by the use of a substitute form.” (Halliday, 2000:317) Conjunction is defined as “the combining of any two textual elements into a potentially coherent complex semantic unit”. (Thompson, 2000:156)

According to Hoey (2000), coherence refers to the reader’s evaluation of a discourse, and it is subjective for such evaluation may be various among different readers. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion is a necessary though not a sufficient condition for the coherence of a text. Therefore, the coherence of a discourse may depend on some other factors, such as the mutual knowledge between the writer and the reader. In the sense, presupposition serves as a good way to achieve the coherence of the discourse.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Realization of Textual Cohesion through Presupposition

The study revealed that presupposition contributes to realize cohesion by cohesive devices—reference including the third personal pronouns, demonstrative reference and comparative reference, noun phrases, ellipsis or substitution and conjunction, and to realize the coherence of the discourse based on the common knowledge shared by the writer and the reader in a business letter.

1) The Third Personal Pronouns

The third person forms *he, she, it, they* are used to refer to people or things that have been

previously discussed in the discourse. The third person forms are the main referential resources, since they are both anaphoric and explicit. They are widely applied by writers when writing business letters, so as to make the discourse more cohesive and understandable. As is shown in the following examples

1. We were delighted to receive your enquiry about the Prima Donna early last month and to send our agent, Kiefer Lodge, to demonstrate it for you in your home.

We are sure you were impressed with it. (Sample 14)

2. During his visit John will be able to discuss your precise requirements and make appropriate recommendations.

He will also be able to give you approximate guidelines about the cost of this work. (Sample 2)

3. We regret to have to complain about late delivery of the filing cabinets ordered on 2nd July.

We did not receive them until this morning though you had guaranteed delivery within a week. (Sample 38)

4. We enclose a catalogue and export price list so that you can see the wide range of chemicals we make.

You can also see that many of them will be useful in your country, as they are particularly good for its crops and climate. (Sample 11)

From example 1 to 3, the pronouns *it*, *he* and *them* respectively refer back to the Prima Donna, John and filing cabinets. In example 4, pronouns *them* and *they* are used to refer to chemicals appeared in the previous clause. Those third person pronouns presuppose the people and things that have been mentioned in the previous clauses, which make the two clauses connected more cohesively.

2) *Demonstrative Reference*

Demonstrative references such as *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*, *here*, *there*, *now* and *then* and comparative references can refer to the information mentioned in the previous sentences and function as presuppositions to help build the cohesion among clauses in business letters, which is demonstrated in the following examples:

5. We have read carefully your letter of complaint on the discrepancy of the goods with the original sample.

Apparently this was caused by the oversight of our production department. (Sample 44)

6. We note with regret that your sales on our account have fallen considerably during the past few months.

At first, we thought this might be due to the slack season in your country, but on looking into the matter more closely, we find the general trend during this period has been upwards. (Sample 45)

7. Please confirm these terms in writing as soon as possible, after which we will arrange for a formal agreement to be drawn up.

When this is signed, a circular will be prepared for distribution to our customers in France announcing your appointment as our agents. (Sample 47)

8. You claim that the quality of the goods shipped per S.S. "East Wind" is inferior to the original sample and request us to make a 10% reduction on the contract price.

This does not appear to us to be reasonable, as we sent you an advance sample prior to shipment, and not hearing from you to the contrary, presumed it to be acceptable to you. (Sample 41)

In example 5, the demonstrative *this* refers back to discrepancy of the goods with the original sample of the previous clause, which illustrates that the demonstrative *this* can function as presupposition which can encapsulate the information mentioned in the preceding clause. Example 6, 7 and 8 are of the same case as example 5, in which the demonstratives *this* presuppose information discussed in the preceding clauses so as to achieve the cohesion of the discourse.

9. In reply, we regret to inform you that our buyers in Odense find your price much too high.

Information indicates that some parcels of Turkish origin have been sold there at a level about ten percent lower than yours. (Sample 27)

10. We also manufacture other cloths in which you may be interested, and are sending a complete range of patterns by parcel post.

All these cloths are selling very well in many countries and can be supplied from stock. (Sample 14)

Similarly, in examples 9 and 10, the demonstratives *there* and *these* function as presuppositions by which the reader can interpret the information mentioned in the previous clause. *there* and *these* refers to *Odense* and *other cloths* respectively, which helps to establish the cohesive relations between the two clauses so as to guarantee the textual cohesion of the whole discourse.

3) *Comparative Reference*

It is the comparatives that indicate something that is being compared with something else has been mentioned previously in the discourse. Therefore, comparative references can function as presuppositions that encapsulate the information mentioned in the previous clauses, which serves to realize the cohesive relationship between clauses. They are frequently used in business letters to keep the discourse coherent as in the following examples below:

11. We are now preparing a replacement order, which will be delivered to you on Wednesday morning.

We will collect the Conway items at the same time. (Sample 13)

12. Information indicates that some parcels of X origin

have been sold there at a level about ten percent lower than yours.

We do not deny that the quality of Y Kernels is slightly better, but the difference in price should, in no case, be as big as ten percent. (Sample 27)

13. At that time we had expected to be able to complete the order within the delivery date we gave you which was July 5th, but since then we have heard our main supplier of copper has gone bankrupt.

This means that we have to find another supplier who could fulfill all the outstanding contracts we have to complete. (Sample 30)

In example 11, the comparative form the same time presupposes that the Conway items will be collected on Wednesday morning; in example 12, the comparative form better presupposes that the quality of parcels of X origin is not good as that of Y Kernels. In example 13, another presupposes that we have supplier of copper before. Therefore, the comparatives serve as presupposition that summarizing the previous information, or set up a relation of contrast between the presupposing and the presupposed items, so as to realize the textual cohesion, which is shown in the examples below:

14. We shall appreciate it if you will quote us your floor price for cloisonné cups and vases of different sizes at your earliest convenience.

Quotations for other recommended Chinese arts and crafts appealing to tourists as gifts are also welcome. (Sample 25)

15. In case there arise some disputes which couldn't be solved, it is necessary to state an arbitrator which can settle such disputes.

Unless otherwise agreed, contracts are commonly governed by the laws of our country. (Sample 49)

The adverb also in example 14 also serves as a cohesive device for it presupposes that quotations for other recommended Chinese arts and crafts appealing to tourists as gifts in the previous clause will be similarly appreciated by us; the adverb otherwise in example 15 presupposes that to state an arbitrator which can settle such disputes in the preceding clause is agreed by us, which facilitates the cohesion of the two clauses.

4) *Ellipsis or Substitution*

In English business writing, to achieve the clarity of letter discourse, sometimes the writer chooses to omit the information which he assumes that the reader can supply the missing part by looking up to the preceding clause. That is, ellipsis serves as presupposition which encapsulates the missing message of the previous clause, thus the cohesive relationship of the two adjacent clauses can be built, so as to realize the cohesion of the discourse. It is easy for the readers to get the explicit information from

substitution and ellipsis, because the missing part is presupposed in the immediate previous clause. Therefore, ellipsis and substitution not only contributes to the clarity of business letter discourse, but also helps to achieve the cohesion of the discourse. This can be seen in the following examples:

16. We thank you for your L/C No. 6288 covering your Order No. 333 for 12,000 dozen X Brand jeans.

On perusal, we find that transshipment and partial shipment are not allowed. As direct steamers to your port are few and far between, in most cases, goods have to be transshipped from Y. (Sample 32)

17. We thank you for your letter dated 21st August in connection with the captioned goods.

In reply, we take pleasure in advising you that the confirmed, irrevocable Letter of Credit No.654 for the sum of USD5, 500, has been opened this morning through the Z Bank.

Upon receipt of the same, please effect shipment of the goods booked by us as soon as possible. (Sample 33)

In example 16, the asserted information L/C No. 6288 covering your Order No. 333 for 12,000 dozen X Brand jeans in the previous clause is presupposed by On perusal in the subsequent clause. Thus, the reader can interpret the missing information through presupposition, which helps to establish the cohesive relations between the two clauses. The same effect can be achieved in example 17, In reply and Upon receipt of the same presuppose the information your letter dated 21st August in connection with the captioned goods and the confirmed, irrevocable Letter of Credit No.654 for the sum of USD5, 500 in the preceding clauses respectively, which facilitates the smooth flow the of discourse.

18. It is of course possible that you are facing difficulties of which we are not aware.

If so, we should like to know of them since it is always possible for us to take measures that would help. (Sample 45)

In example 18, so presupposes the asserted information you are facing difficulties of which we are not aware in the previous clause, which illustrates how substitution contributes to cohesion through presupposition. Therefore, the two clauses are cohesively related so as to guarantee the smooth information flow in the discourse. In addition, the information *you to tackle the difficulties* followed with *help* in the second clause is left out, which the reader also can presuppose by referring to the previous clause. Thus, the cohesion of discourse can be achieved with the help of presupposition.

5) *Conjunction*

Conjunction which serves as presupposition encapsulating the information previously mention in

the discourse contributes the cohesion and coherence of the discourse; part of the asserted information in the preceding clause can be compacted into a noun phrase whereby the reader is able to presuppose the information previously mentioned, which helps to achieve the cohesion of the discourse. Conjunctions serve as presuppositions of the information mentioned in the previous clauses so that a cohesive relationship can be established between the two clauses, as is shown in the following examples:

19. As a matter of fact, we are quite satisfied with the way you handle our business and the amount of business you have brought us.

However, we are of the opinion that a bigger turnover must be reached to justify establishing the agency. (Sample 48)

20. This does not appear to us to be reasonable, as we sent you an advance sample prior to shipment, and not hearing from you to the contrary, presumed it to be acceptable to you.

Meanwhile, this is a quality we have sold for years without receiving any complaints from other customers. (Sample 41)

21. As you see in our survey report stating twenty sets of heaters severely damaged, these goods are quite unsaleable.

Therefore, we would ask you to ship replacements for the broken goods as soon as possible while we will register our claim with the insurance company. (Sample 39)

From example 19 to 21, the conjunctions however, meanwhile and therefore respectively presuppose the whole previous clauses or clause complexes. However shows what will be discussed is simply contrast to the information conveyed in the previous clause; meanwhile indicates the events or actions mentioned in the two clauses occur at the same time; and therefore suggests information conveyed in the previous clause functions as the cause of the second clause. They all serve as an efficient way to make the information moves smoothly so as to make the business letter discourse logic and cohesive.

B. Realization of Textual Coherence through Presupposition

Since the most prominent function of business letter is to realize successful communication between the writer and the reader so as to promote the business relationship between the two companies, the writer is intended to make the letter clear and understandable by using the words or expressions that he assumes the reader can easily interpret. Such words and expressions are defined as the common knowledge, by which the reader could interpret the implicit meaning conveyed in the letter. In other words, the writer may assume that some common knowledge about social, cultural or technical terms is shared by their two sides, so he will leave it unstated as presupposition in the discourse.

The writer makes sure that the reader can grasp his intended meaning in the discourse with the help of common knowledge, and it serves as a good way to keep clarity of the letter. Therefore, this dynamic interaction between the writer and the reader contributes to the coherence of the discourse. Since presupposition or the common knowledge contributes to the coherence of the discourse, so it is frequently used in English business writing. The writer intends to leave some information he assumes to be shared by the reader unstated to guarantee the succinctness as well as coherence of the discourse, as is shown in the following examples:

22. Payment for the assembling fee and shipping expenses is to be made by sight *L/C* to be opened by you not later than 30 days before the shipping schedule. (Sample 49)

23. Moreover, we wish to invite your attention to the fact that the Contract is concluded on *FOB* Shanghai basis, therefore, your responsibility is to dispatch the vessel to the loading port in due course. (Sample 50)

24. We wish to refer you to our Order No.113 for 400 cases of pottery, from which you will see that this order was placed on *CFR* basis. (Sample 51)

From example 22 to 24, short forms *L/C*, *FOB* and *CFR* are used in the letters, because the writers assume that these technical words are the common knowledge shared by the readers and them. Actually, these words are frequently mentioned in foreign trade, so the interpretation of them is dependent on the readers' mutual knowledge. *L/C* (Letter of Credit) refers to a payment method whereby the importers can offer secure terms of payment to the exporters; both *FOB* (Free on Board) and *CFR* (Cost and Freight) are trade terms widely used in international settlement: *FOB* means that the seller delivers when the goods pass the ship's rails at the named port of shipment, which means that the buyer has to bear all costs and risks of loss of or damage to the goods from that point. *CFR* means that the seller delivers when the goods pass the ship's rail in the port of the shipment, and the seller must pay the costs and freight necessary to bring the goods to the named port of destination but the risk of loss of or damage to the goods, as well as any additional costs due to events occurring after the time the goods have been delivered on board the vessel, are transferred from the seller to the buyer when the goods pass the ship's rail in the port of shipment. (Wan Yuanyuan, 2009:24-25) This is regarded as common knowledge or presupposition; therefore, the writer left it unstated to keep the whole discourse concise and coherent.

25. In reply to your letter dated July 10, we are pleased to advise that the confirmed, irrevocable Letter of Credit No.326 for the amount of USD24,000 was established through the X Bank, London on July 15. (Sample 36)

The same effect can be achieved in example 25, in which the writer assumes *your letter dated July10* and *X Bank* to be the common knowledge whereby the reader could interpret the implicit information, so the writer leaves it unexplained. *your letter dated July10* presupposes the reader is familiar with its content, so the writer chooses to keep it unexplained; *X Bank* refers to Agricultural Bank of Y, which is known to all. The common knowledge or presupposition serves as a bridge connecting the semantic gap, by which the reader can understand the letter without any difficulties and regard the discourse as coherent.

V. CONCLUSION

With the help of presupposition, the referential relations can be established between clauses through the third person pronouns, demonstrative reference and comparative reference. The missing information of the immediately previous clause is presupposed in the subsequent clause, thus the textual cohesion can be achieved through ellipsis or substitution; conjunction which serves as presupposition encapsulating the information previously mention in the discourse contributes the cohesion and coherence of the discourse. Presupposition serves as a bridge connecting the semantic gap so that the reader can easily and correctly interpret the unexplained information which is assumed to be the common knowledge shared by the writer and the reader. To achieve the clarity of business letter, the writer usually implicitly expresses the information that is assumed by him to be known to the reader, and he believes that the counterpart could work out the missing information with the help of the background knowledge. Therefore, the apparently non-cohesive discourse keeps coherent in deep structure.

From what has been discussed in this present study, it can be concluded that presupposition can be widely used in English business writing and meet textual cohesion and coherence of the discourse through reference, ellipsis or substitution and conjunction. Business letter, a letter dealing with business activities conducted by parties at home or abroad, is an inevitable tool used in the negotiation of trade conditions concerning the specific information about the transaction. The basic writing principles which are known as the “seven Cs”: completeness, concreteness, clearness, conciseness, courtesy, consideration, and correctness. Based on the distinct features and specific writing principle, presupposition is used to realize the textual cohesion and coherence in business letters. Therefore, besides a good command of English and knowledge about foreign trade, it is necessary and beneficial for the writer to master presupposition so as to produce a letter of good quality.

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