



Cohesive Devices in Business English Speaking and Listening Discourse

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Abstract

Business speaking and listening is an important course for cultivating business English majors' interactive skills, playing a key role in future successful business contacts. The author in this paper attempts to explore explicit and implicit cohesive devices in business speaking and listening discourses. It is found that explicit cohesive devices are mainly used when expressing willingness to establish further business relationships while implicit ones in unwillingness to do business. It is hoped that this paper may shed some lights on business English study.

Key words: Explicit cohesive devices; Implicit cohesive devices; Business settings

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INTRODUCTION

Listening and speaking are important for business English majors, laying solid foundation on fluent and effective communication in business settings. Speaking and listening in business settings aim to keep in touch with each other and broaden mutual trade and exchange to enhance economic development. In order to achieve effective communications, business parties have to produce cohesive and coherent discourse with cohesive devices. Otherwise, it may lead to obstacles in communication

between two parties. So the study of cohesion is necessary and practical in business listening and speaking teaching. Currently, studies on students' listening and speaking are focused on listening and speaking skills while neglecting the influence of cohesive devices to communicative strategies (Field, 1998; Vandergrift, 1999). Scholars both at home and abroad have made great efforts and achievements in the field of cohesion. Halliday and Hasan (2001) have laid solid theoretical basis in cohesion. Zhu Yongsheng, et al. (2001) have had a detailed study in cohesion in their book *A Contrastive Study of Cohesion in English and Chinese*. However, few works have been done to business English, especially the implicit cohesive devices are seldom studied in discourse for its intangible markers. This contributes the main reasons why the author wants to apply cohesion theory into business English listening and speaking. This paper attempts to analyze cohesive devices in business English listening and speaking tasks in order to shed some lights on successful business contacts.

1. FEATURES OF BUSINESS ENGLISH DISCOURSE

With the development of global market oriented economy of our country, there is an increasing demand for international business contacts so that business people can communicate with people from different countries effectively and fluently. Many universities and colleges in China have set up business English major aiming at training talents who both have English language skills and the knowledge of business to cater for the globalization trend. Business English is the English for specific purpose in the international business activities of this particular professional discipline services (Shi, 2017). Business English discourse is to convey information to the other party, which emphasizes an accurate effect rather than

an aesthetic one of other literature works. It entails the features of logical organization, objectivity and purpose for persuasiveness and successful transaction. Focusing on the accuracy of facts and communication information, conciseness and brevity are the soul of business English discourse, so cohesive devices are preferred. The greater demand for explicitness in the business discourse leads to a higher frequency of employment of reference, conjunction, lexical cohesion, substitution and ellipsis (Qi, 2008). In order to describe the quality or characteristics of something or inform the other party with the instructions on how to use products, objectivity is also needed in business English discourse. In order to persuade the other party to accept the product and promote a successful transaction, the two parties have to employ cohesive words to achieve the coherence and show an active and friendly atmosphere to avoid redundancy and being boring between the sellers and buyers.

As a major course of business English major, business English speaking and listening aims to teach students in commercial field how to express their idea in a clear, simple and explicit way, and how to persuade the other party for a successful transaction in a concise, accurate and polite way. In order to convey messages in a friendly atmosphere, business English majors have to employ many cohesive devices in their speaking and listening discourse for the achievement of coherence.

2. COHESION

Halliday and Hasan (2001, p.4) defined cohesion as a semantic relation which refers to relations of meaning that exist within the discourse. So cohesion is semantic continuity functioning as explicit or implicit ties between one part of the discourse and another. Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other, in a sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it. Cohesive relations have in principle nothing to do with sentence boundaries (Halliday & Hasan, 2001, p.8). Cohesive devices are mainly classified into explicit and implicit cohesive ones. Explicit cohesive devices are a kind of cohesion in form, which is static and composed of intonation, lexical cohesion and grammatical means. Explicit cohesive devices are easy to be recognized for its tangible cohesion markers while implicit cohesive devices difficult to be grasped in discourse for its intangible markers. From the perspective of cohesion, successful communication in business settings is dependent on the understanding of explicit cohesive devices like reference, reiteration, collocation, conjunction and so on, and the inference reached on the basis of implicit interpersonal, spatial, temporal, causal and intentional relationships implied in the discourse (Brown, 1997, p.39). The process of business interaction is actually one in which listeners and speakers rely on

cognitive reasoning and social background to construct meaning. Meanwhile it is also a process of negotiating meaning in the interaction between the two sides in business settings.

According to Halliday and Hasan (2001, p.329), explicit cohesive devices, a kind of formal cohesion and static description, refers to a series of tangible cohesive devices including phonology, reference, substitution, conjunction, ellipsis and lexical cohesion.

eg.

A: Did I hurt your feelings?

B: I didn't mean to.

Cohesion between the two sentences has been realized not only by ellipsis, with "I didn't mean to" presupposing hurt your feelings, but also by conjunction, the adversative meaning "but" being expressed by the second sentence having the rising-falling tone.

Implicit cohesive devices, a kind of semantic cohesion and dynamic description, occur when the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on the external aspects of texture like the context of situation, register, social settings.

eg.

Linda: Do you quote FOB or CIF?

Jason: We usually quote on a CIF basis.

Linda: The market at our ends has become pretty competitive. In order to sell successfully there, your goods will have to be competitive in price.

Jason: You'll find our prices very attractive.

Linda: Would you give us an offer for Art. No.1137 CIFIC 3% London?

Jason: What's the quantity you wish to order?

Linda: We'd like to start with 25,000 pieces. It's an attractive quantity, do you think so?

Jason: When do you want the goods to be delivered?

Linda: Could you make it for March?

Jason: I think we should be able to manage it. OK, so now we can offer you 25,000 pieces for Art. No.1137 at US\$78 per piece CIFIC 3% London for shipment in March.

Linda: Thank you. How long will this offer be open?

Jason: It's valid for three days.

Linda: I'll study your offer with my colleagues and give you a definite reply in three days.

This dialogue between Linda and Jason is about inquiry and offer for some products. Linda is trying to reduce the price, and Jason tries every means to persuade the potential client of accepting their price. In this example, fewer words about price have been mentioned. Instead, the quotes are all answered with the statements which are seemingly unrelated to words about price like "the market at our end has become pretty competitive", "what's the quantity you wish to order?", "when do you want the goods to be delivered?" and "how long will this offer be open?" It seems that the business English discourse is not coherent. Actually, we will find "the competitive

market”, “quantity”, “the time for delivery” and “validity for the offer” all have close relationship with price when we interpret the discourse with some external aspects like the social norms in business settings, business competitive atmosphere, interactive skills in business, and even some psychological knowledge to make a judgment on whether the other party is anxious to buy products or not.

In short, explicit cohesive devices are the internal network of relations connecting one part to another in a text, while implicit cohesive devices are the external network of conceptual relations underlying the text.

Brown (1997, p.36) deemed that listeners need to make reference to something else for the referential components, understand the meaning of sentences in context and macro-structure, and make reasoning about the interpersonal, spatial, temporal, casual and intentional relationships implied in the text during the listening comprehension. So is the process of business interaction between listeners and speakers. This paper takes Halliday and Hasan’s theory of cohesion (2001) as theoretical framework. Both explicit and implicit cohesive devices are studied in the process of analyzing the data or examples which are mainly from Business English: Viewing, Listening and Speaking (Book III)

3. ANALYSIS OF COHESION IN BUSINESS ENGLISH DISCOURSE

In this part, explicit and implicit cohesive devices will be studied respectively with example illustrations.

3.1 Explicit Cohesive Devices

Explicit cohesive devices mainly include reference, lexical cohesion, conjunction, substitution and ellipsis. In business English settings, all these five cohesive devices are widely used to achieve coherence and promote successful transactions.

3.1.1 Reference

Reference is the set of grammatical resources which indicate readers whether something is being repeated from somewhere else in the text or whether it has not appeared before as the new information. It includes personal reference, demonstrative reference and comparative reference. Reference is the relation between an element of the text and something else by reference to which it is interpreted in the given instance (Halliday & Hasan, 2001, p.38).

eg.

M: I want to buy four ski boards of this type. What ‘s your price?

W: The list price is 3,000 yuan each, but you’re our regular customer, so I’ll give you a 10% discount.

M: That’s very reasonable. I’ll take them.

In this example, “our” and “them” are reference items which are interpreted by reference to the woman’s

company and the four ski boards respectively. It is the principle of interpretation that defines the role of the two reference items in the semantics of the text.

3.1.2 Conjunction

Conjunction is defined as the combination of any two textual elements into a potentially coherent semantic whole, mainly realized by conjunctive elements which are cohesive not in themselves but indirectly by virtue of their specific meanings. Conjunction is based on the assumption that there are in the linguistic system forms of systematic relations between sentences (Halliday & Hasan, 2001, p.320). Conjunction shows the relationships between a linguistic unit and its preceding one or the following one, so that the readers or listeners can understand a discourse successfully.

eg.

A: If your price is favourable, we can place an order right away.

B: We may reconsider our price if your order is big enough.

In this example, “if “ is the conjunction item which represents semantic links between the price and quantity that are constitutive of business interaction to achieve successful communication.

3.1.3 Lexical Cohesion

Lexical cohesion refers to the cohesive effect achieved by the selection of vocabulary which includes reiteration and collocation (Halliday & Hasan, 2001, p.274). Recitation is a form of lexical cohesion which involves the repetition of a lexical item, at one end of the scale; the use of a general word to refer back to a lexical item, at the other end of the scale; and a number of things in between the use of a synonym, near-synonym, or superordinate (Halliday & Hasan, 2001, p.67). Collocation is usually achieved through the association of lexical items that regularly co-occur. General word, synonym and super-ordinate of reiteration occur in business settings with high frequency.

eg.

A: Mr. Green, did you find anything interesting at the fair?

B: Oh, yes, Ms. Lin. I’m particularly interested in your home electrical food cooking ovens. They are energy-saving and beautiful in style. If the prices are reasonable, we’ll purchase large quantities of them. Will you please quote us a price?

A: All right. Would you tell us the quantity you require so that we can work out the offers?

B: I’ll do that. Meanwhile, could you give me an indication of price?

A: Here are our FOB price lists. All the prices in the lists are subject to our confirmation.

In this example, “prices”, “purchase”, “quote”, “work out the offers”, “indication of price”, “FOB price lists are all composed of an effective interaction between the seller and buyer.

3.1.4 Substitution and Ellipsis

Substitution is the replacement of one item by another, which can be divided into nominal, verbal and clausal substitution, while ellipsis is the omission of one item which is usually the given information, but readers can trace the omission back to other parts of the text and easily grasp the meaning of the omission. Ellipsis avoids repetition and impresses readers with new or important information to link the whole context together. Substitution and ellipsis are very similar to each other, and ellipsis is simply “substitution by zero”. They embody the same fundamental relation between words or groups or clauses. Substitution and ellipsis are a relation within the discourse, and the presupposed item is presenting in the preceding text to achieve coherence of text (Halliday & Hasan, 2001, p.142).

eg.

Jack: Would you tell us the quantity you require so that we can work out the offers?

John: 50,000 units.

Jack: If so, we might be able to offer you a 10% cut. Ten percent off is about as low as we can go. You know those items are in the greatest demand in foreign markets.

John: That sounds more than what we can handle.

Jack: Well, let me check my figures and get back to you.

In this example, we can find the presupposed items of “if so” and “that” in the preceding text are the large quantity of the product and ten percent off of the original price. They are substitutions. “10% cut” and “ten percent off” which would be followed by “of the original price” are ellipsis.

3.2 Implicit Cohesive Devices

Implicit cohesive devices refer to the understanding of a discourse dependent on some external aspects of texture: what is going on; what part the language is playing; who are involved; modes of interaction and social setting which we may summarize as form and context of discourse, setting, participants, ends (intent and effect), key, medium, genre and interaction norms (Halliday & Hasan, 2001, p.22). They evoke us to make reference on the context of situation, register and social settings. The purpose for both sides of business English communication is to do business successfully. They usually express their idea, especially their unwillingness to do business with the other side implicitly to show their politeness and respect to each other. Maintaining business relationships may have the most significant financial impact, as these relationships equal to financial gain, so it is very important for a successful business to identify potential or non-potential clients or partners according to the implicit cohesive devices.

eg.

W: I think it may find a good market in your country. By the way, how long will you stay in China?

M: One week. But I have been here for five days now.

W: I think you’ll understand our products better if you can visit our factory.

M: It sounds a good idea but I’m afraid I’ll leave next Monday, so I have no time to make it.

W: Shall we rest a while and have a cup of tea before going around?

M: Sorry, I’ll take a look at other booths now. See you later.

W: See you. Have a good stay in China.

In this example, “I have been here for five days now”, “I’ll leave next Monday”, and “I’ll take a look at other booths now” are not the direct answers to questions by the woman. The discourse is seemingly not coherent. But we know that these answers of the man actually are rejects to establish business contacts with the woman based on the implicit cohesive devices like context of a trade fair, our common social experience about business settings and our reference.

CONCLUSION

Based on the theories of cohesion and features of business English discourse, some finds are made in this paper that explicit cohesive devices are employed with high frequency to express purpose and ideas clearly for further business relationships while implicit cohesive devices are mainly used when expressing unwillingness to do business politely but avoiding embarrassment. It should also be pointed out that implicit cohesive devices for its intangible markers are still vague and difficult to operate, so the author’s discussion in this aspect may be incomplete and insufficient. This paper is only a try, and its effect is open to be discussed.

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