



## A Register Analysis of Foreign Trade Correspondence

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### Abstract

The present study aims to examine Foreign Trade Correspondence language features within the framework of Register theory. Every aspect of Foreign Trade Correspondence, from the lexical level to the syntactical level of textual level can be considered highly motivated or greatly influenced by its special register. Hence, the findings based on this research will enrich the horizon of Foreign Trade Correspondence teaching and learning.

**Key words:** Foreign trade correspondence; Register analysis; Language

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### INTRODUCTION

Foreign Trade Correspondence (FTC), as an effective tool for trade transaction between countries, plays a very important role in international trade. There have been a wide range of studies on FTC or business letters, but the studies on writing skills of FTC are not insightful enough for the readers.

Liu (2004) discusses the language styles of FTC and its writing strategies. The study is carried out on the basis of stylistic theories. Chen (2007) has analyzed the FTC teaching strategies under the Schematic Theory and probes into the nature of FTC teaching strategies and their applications in the classrooms. He suggests that better

FTC teaching is conducive to more FTC learning and the present FTC teaching is for not teaching later on. When teachers make choices among FTC teaching strategies, they are supposed to abide by some teaching rules, so respect for students' current cognitive levels, concern the sustained study, encourage helping each other, strengthen self-consciousness, and develop independence to lay a firm foundation for future career development.

As is known, a good command of writing foreign trade correspondence is a necessary skill in international trade; however, none of the thesis before is focused on the writing skills of foreign trade correspondence from the perspective of Register theory.

### 1. THE THEORY OF REGISTER

Halliday (1978, p.23) defined the term "Register" using the following words: "the set of meanings, the configuration of semantic patterns, that are typically drawn upon under the specific conditions, along with the words and structures that are used in the realization of these meanings". Different field, mode and tenor symbolize the specific register. Generally speaking, the field stands for the experiential values the speaker's own, while the model stands for the textual values mostly, and the tenor stands for the interpersonal values. The main function of registration is to describe the relationship between specific language style and the context in which it is located.

According to Halliday et al. (1964), the term "field" refers to what is going on, to the area of operation of the language activity. To speak concisely and clearly, the field refers to what the speakers are talking about, where they are having the conversation, the time and reason for the conversation, namely, when and why. "Mode" refers to "the medium or channel of the language activity and it determines, or rather correlates with, the role played by the language activity in the situation". It refers to how you talk, that is, you express your view and convey

your message in what way, how such way you choose works in an activity, no matter whether it is a face-to-face communication, or a chat on the phone, even or a piece of writing through the letter and so on. “Tenor” refers to “the cluster of socially meaningful participant relationships, both permanent attributes of the participants and role relationships that are specific to the situation, including speech roles, those that come into being through the exchange of verbal meanings.” Simply speaking, the tenor means who is talking and who is talked to.

All in all, registration is a term which explains the connection between texts and their contexts from the perspective of field, which stands for what, model for how, and tenor for who.

## 2. A REGISTER ANALYSIS OF FOREIGN TRADE CORRESPONDENCE

### 2.1 The Field of Foreign Trade Correspondence

Field, related to the ideational function of language, is the domain where a variety is used. It is already known that the procedures of international trade consist of establishing trade relationship, making inquiry, making an offer, on price, ordering, concluding a transaction, making shipment, insurance, negotiating payment, lodging a claim, and FTCs exist in almost every step of the trade activity. Due to its different fields (purposes), the FTCs can be classified into different categories—letters of establishing business relations, letters of inquiries and offers, letters on price, letters of ordering, letters on terms of payment, letters on contracts, letters of shipment, letters on insurance, together with letters of claims and arbitration.

As a result of its strong professional purpose, the field of FTC is usually established by convention, for example, formal thanks are usually used at the beginning of a letter and then it comes to the subject. For example:

Dear Sirs,

*Thank you for your inquiry of May 20, 2001 and appreciate your interest in our “Wang Bang” suitcases.*

*“Wang Bang” suitcases are really a good choice as you may have known from our catalogue that they are both durable and light.*

*We are selling the suitcases for the special summer price of US\$20 CIF EMP, which is 20% off the original prices. The prices are subject to the products being unsold.*

*We hope that you take advantage of this rare opportunity, and place an order with us.*

*Sincerely*

This letter has used the appropriate style of a FTC. The first paragraph of the FTC expresses the writer’s thanks, the second and third paragraph is the subject of the letter, and the last paragraph is the close. The writer employs

many words to express honesty, friendship and goodwill in this letter, such as *thank you, appreciate, hope, etc.*

Sometimes the former trade activities, good cooperation, situation of the international market and the response of clients and so on may be referred to for the purpose of promoting a request, which is a kind of communication strategy. FTC is always about one thing on which agreement or disagreement between partners are shown, such as on price, insurance, terms of payment, date of shipment. It is evident that the field of discourse is determined by the context, the writers’ experience and his writing skills. In addition, it is also determined by the steps of a trade activity, for instance, letting the partner follow their pace, promoting a request, counterattack in time, breaking the deadlock and so forth. Take following different sentences of the trade activity for example:

(a) *Please allow us to express our hope of opening an account with you.*

(b) *Our products are of very good quality and our firm is always regarded by our customers as the most reliable one.*

(c) *We are pleased to inform you that we have just marketed our newly-developed...*

(d) *We are interested in your new product...and shall be pleased to have a catalog and price list.*

(e) *A confirmation order is enclosed for your reference.*

### 2.2 The Mode of Foreign Trade Correspondence

The way you express your view and convey your message in FTC is carefully planned, which is well reflected in its choice of words, sentences and the textual structure. As a formal genre, FTC has the requirement of sobriety, elegance, preciseness and formalness. And next, the mode of FTC from three aspects such as aspects of glossary, syntax and text will be elaborated.

(a) In the aspect of glossary, FTC has its own features.

i) FTC often uses different words to express the same meaning as ordinary English, and the ordinary words we are familiar with are given new meanings.

For example, the writer use “*deliver*” takes place of “*send*”.

ii) FTC uses longer and more formal lexical phrases, such as “*as per your request*” and “*place an order with*”. The use of the phrase “*as per your request*” and “*place an order with*” can make a sentence more solemn and formal.

iii) FTC frequently uses words with business character, such as the term of extending the L/C (letter of credit).

For example:

*It is possible for us to extend L/C No.1 by two weeks.*

*It will be appreciated if you could extend the L/C for another 15 days.*

iv) FTC often uses many abbreviations, for instance, L/C (letter of credit), FAS (free alongside ship), FOB (free on board), FCA (free carrier), W.P.A. (with particular average), B/L (Bill of Lading), D/P (documents against payment), ETA (estimated time of arrival).

(b) In light of syntax, FTC with grand structure is more suitable than that of oral form.

For example, the sentence that “*We would appreciate your catalogues and quotations*” is better than its oral form that “*We are glad if you sent me your catalogues and quotations*”.

FTCs mainly focus on the matters to be handled without delay. Hence the present tense and the future tense are preferable to the past tense.

(c) As to the construction of a text, FTC has its special format as well as its particular means to realize its particular textual function. In order to save time and achieve the purpose of effect, FTCs are all short and brief. Trade activities include the procedures relating to numbers and trade items, and the best way to construct a text is to demonstrate the data, for data demonstration can enhance the efficiency of information delivery. For example:

Dear Sirs,

*Thank you for your letter of March 30 in which you expressed your interest in our electric heaters.*

*At your request, we are pleased to make you a firm offer subject to your acceptance reaching us before 30, April, local time”:*

*Commodities: “Hot Wave” electric heaters, catalogue number 55*

*Color: Silver*

*Quantity: 400 sets*

*Price: USD40.00 per piece, CIF Hamburg*

*Shipment: May /June*

*Terms of payment: By stipulated, irrevocable letter of credit in our favor payable by draft at sight to reach the seller one month before shipment and remain valid for negotiation in China till the 15<sup>th</sup> day after shipment.*

*There has been a heavy demand for our heaters recently. Such a rising demand can only result in the increase of prices. You will benefit from the rising market if you can let us have your acceptance immediately.*

*Yours faithfully*

### 2.3 The Tenor of Foreign Trade Correspondence

The tenor of the FTC relates to the relationship between participants in certain situations. The social roles have already been complied with and defined, i.e. buyer and seller, buyer and producer and so on. Considering the ultimate goal of the seller or producer, there is a great amount of persuasion to accomplish a transaction.

The aim of a businessman is to make money and not to waste time. This concern with accomplishing a business transaction and earning money exerts a great impact on the interpersonal function of language. But this function is realized differently as a result of the status of the client in each case. The rule the interpersonal function should obey is that “the customer is always right” which in turn affects the degree of politeness of the language sellers use. This

is closely associated with the degree of formality based on how well a buyer is known to a seller. Accordingly, cooperative attitude in correspondence can be very helpful in establishing satisfactory relations, which are essential component in business.

The tenor of FTC consists of two types of relationship. One is the long-standing relationship, i.e. the first order of social role; and the other is the temporary and dynamic relationship being called the second order of social role.

(a) We can see from the view of long-time and static relationship, to define the tenor as the participants’ role relationship in the context of culture means the relative features compared with other participants, not the individual character absolutely. It is a node in the net of complex social relationship. The interpersonal relationship in FTC refers to the relationship between the addresser and the addressee, the relationship between the buyer and the seller, the relationship between the insured and the insurer and so on.

In fact, the concept of tenor can be divided into three hypo-categories, i.e. status, the extent of participation and the feelings. The factors, such as the degree of familiarity, affect status, i.e. equal status and unequal status. So, the language fit for its status is the language harmonious with the situation.

(b) From the point of temporary and dynamic relationship, we can define the tenor as the role relationship of the participants in the context. According to Halliday’s functional grammar (1978), the roles in the context of international trade fall into two types, which are giving and asking, forming two pairs of role relationship, i.e. offer/ receiver and requester/provider. In addition, the exchange of goods can also be divided into two types including information, goods and service. All the exchanged goods can be desirable or undesirable, profit or nonprofit. Desirability is closely related to benefit, and they have the relationship of subjective reflection (desirability) and objective result (benefit) which can influence the communicative process and the language used. For instance, in FTC, with the intention of asking for information, goods and service, people in one part often use the way of persuasion to talk to the opposite part into offering information, goods and service. One of the main functions of FTC is to exert an influence on the attitude and behavior of the opposite part, so the method of persuasion is often used.

By means of the persuasion strategies, we can make the partner believe that our product and service have higher quality and lower price, and our request is reasonable, and it is beneficial to cooperate with us. The most suitable language should be employed according to the partner and the context with a view to forming a harmonious relation to achieve the best communicative effect. For example,

Dear Sirs,

*I enclose an illustrated supplement to our catalogue. It covers the latest designs which are now available from stock.*

*We are most gratified that you have, for several years, included a selection of our products in your mail-order catalogues. The resulting sales have been very steady.*

*We believe that you will find our new designs most attractive. They should get a very good reputation in your market.*

*Once you have had time to study the supplement, please let us know if you would like to take the matter further. We would be very happy to send samples to you for closer inspection.*

*For your information, we are planning a range of classical Chinese furniture which should do well in your market. We will keep you informed on our progress and look forward to hearing from you.*

*Yours truly*

This FTC is a letter on Sales Promotion. The first paragraph of the FTC refers to the enclosure, the second paragraph thanks to the company for their business, the third paragraph refers to the new products, the fourth paragraph offers further services and the last paragraph describes future developments. The letter's main purpose is to maintain the recipient's interest in the seller's products and keep him informed of development. The persuasion method that is used in the FTC above will probably get the customer believe in what is said and subsequently an order may be made.

Generally speaking, all the words should help to form a friendly atmosphere, make the potential customer happy and price acceptable and thus achieve the writing aim. Such considerations in the tenor of the FTCs are extremely critical, now that trade communication may cover other acts besides the acts of buying and selling. Many acts such as promoting goodwill, apologizing, complaining, accepting, claiming, rejecting, demanding etc. are major ingredients of some trade communication situations. Such acts play significant roles for us in examining differences in the mode of discourse, for instance, well-established sub-varieties such as complaint

letters, application letters, etc. in written business letters have already been defined.

Since the buyer and the seller may have interests which are both common and contradictory, it is significant to bear in mind the differences between some overlapping notions: overdone courtesy may equal obsequiousness; overdone sincerity may equal naivety. In conclusion, propriety is the top principle in telling the right act from the wrong.

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## CONCLUSION

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Foreign Trade Correspondence, as a special genre used in international trade has its distinctive features different from common letters. In terms of field of FTC, the FTC varies with the letter content it intends to convey, which can be classified into different categories—letters of establishing business relations, letters of inquiries and offers, letters on price, letters of ordering, letters on terms of payment, letters on contracts, letters of shipment, letters on insurance, together with letters of claims and arbitration. In terms of mode of FTC, FTC is a special variety of written English which purports to fulfill care plans; hence it is characterized by unique stylistic features in light of dictions, sentences and textual structure. In terms of tenor of FTC, The tenor of the FTC relates to the relationship between participants in some specific situations. The social roles have already been complied with and delimited, i.e. buyer and seller, buyer and producer and so on.

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