

Communication Strategies: A Critical Discourse Analysis of a Business Letter

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyze a written discourse which is in the form of an official letter. There are many approaches for discourse analysis. The difference between these approaches is that a few of them include analysis of the texts and others don't (Fairclough, 2000). The letter under observation will be analyzed in the light of the two approaches of Discourse Analysis namely; CDA and Cohesion.

Key words: Communications Strategies % Business Letter % Discourse % UOG

INTRODUCTION

Discourse is defined as 'the flow of knowledge and/or all societal knowledge stored-throughout all time' [1]. There are many versions of discourse analysis [2]. In the work of Foucault [3] discourse has a special meaning. He is of the view that discourse is, 'an entity of sequences of signs in that they are enouncements (ibid, p.141).

There is considerable variation in how terms such as text and discourse are used in linguistics. Stubbs [4] is of the view that, 'sometimes the terminological variation signals important conceptual distinctions but often it does not, and terminological debates are usually of little interest.

According to Cameron [5], in textual analysis we are not concerned only with texts but also with the interactive process of meaning-making. She claims that in case of face to face conversation one can deduce meaning by looking at how participants respond. But in case of written texts, one has to deduce the meaning by comprehending and understanding the written texts with its social context whereas Fairclough (2000, p.69) claims that, 'texts can have casual effects without their necessarily being regular effects, because many other factors in the context determine whether particular texts actually have such effects and can lead to a particular text having a variety of texts, for instance in different interpreters'.

There are many different ways to analyze the texts. But in this study we are going to use two approaches:

- ☺ Cohesion
- ☺ CDA

The reason for using these two approaches is to analyze the structure of the text to see how well it is knitted and interwoven to make the text coherent and logical.

We will explain the background of the text that is going to be analyzed, followed by a brief introduction of the two approaches which will be used. In the end a critical discourse analysis of the text with conclusion is given.

Background of the Text: The text that has been given is a formal letter and this has been proved later under the heading of 'format of the letter', where different features of formal letter have been described in detail. The addressee of the letter is Ms. Musarat Yasmeen Alvi, who is doing a job at University of Gujrat. The letter is written by Consumer Service Supervisor, Mr. Jawed Akhter. The reason for writing a letter is present in the very first paragraph of the letter, where the writer is making an apology against the dissatisfaction of the consumer.

Format of the Letter: The following elements of the letter show that this is a formal/official letter:

Full Block Format: Format of the letter makes it a typical official letter.

Letter Head and Logo: Letter has been written on the letter-pad of the company. Company's logo along with its complete address appears at the top of the page but email address and phone numbers are missing in this list that may be perceived as they don't want any phonic or email contact with its customers.

Letter No. And Date: The representative of the company has given the reference number or letter number with date. This is a part of an official letter implying that an official record of the conversation has been kept for further correspondence.

Addressee and Addresser: Customer's name and address is given at the start and representative's name and his designation at the end. These two things are an essential part of a formal letter.

Salutation: Letter has been started with "Dear" showing respect and honor for the lady.

Body of the Letter: Letter starts with an apology. The person has described the procedure of the chips making in a detail, he says sorry for the inconvenience the addressee has faced and has asked her to get it replaced. Right vocabulary, selection of the terminologies and the use of related jargons show that the person who is writing a letter is well educated and he seems to be a right selection for this post. He is doing three different things in the same letter: making an apology, describing the whole procedure and defending his organization.

Approaches: There are different approaches those deal with the types of discourse, genres, and styles of the text. Here I am using two approaches, Cohesion and CDA.

Approach No 1: Cohesion: Cohesion is a term that is used in the analysis of the discourse to describe the properties of the text. Connor [6] writes, 'Coherence is determined by lexically and grammatically overt intersentential relationships'. It can also be defined in the words of Halliday and Hassan [7] as a link that holds the text together and makes it meaningful. They noted that, 'coherence occurs where the interpretation of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another'.

Halliday and Hassan [8] further state that, 'the concept of ties is the most important when talking about the texture of a text'.

Halliday and Hassan [7] have given five categories of cohesion.

Reference: There are four (anaphoric¹, cataphoric², endophoric³ and exophoric⁴) referential devices that can create cohesion [9].

Ellipsis: Some essential element is omitted from the text and can be recovered by referring to a preceding element in the text. A substitute form is being used for another language item.

Substitution: There is a general approach to the analysis of text which is called as 'substitutional text linguistics' [10]. In this one word is not omitted but substituted for another word.

Conjunction: Words like, 'that', 'rather', 'besides' etcetra that joins phrases, clauses or sections of the text are called conjunctions.

Lexical Cohesion: Lexical cohesion involves the selection of a lexical item that is in some way related to one occurring previously. It is established through the structure of the lexis or vocabulary.

Analysis of the Letter: For the analysis of the letter with cohesion approach we have divided the body of the letter into five paragraphs. This will help us in doing the analysis as we have to refer back to the letter again and again.

The body of the letter starts with a pronoun "we". This "we" refer back to the company or the organization. It is used at several places in the letter and each time it is referring to the whole company. It is considered as anaphoric reference as it is referring to the whole company of LAYS which is already present in the form of company's logo at the top of the letter head.

In this first paragraph, the addressee has used the words "recent disappointment" which show that the addressee might have complained about the product of their company and thus the letter is a reply to that complaint. In the same paragraph the word "you" has

¹ Anaphoric reference refers back to someone or something that has already been introduced.

² Cataphoric reference is opposite to that of anaphora. Something is introduced in the abstract before it is identified or explained.

³ Exophoric reference is used to describe generics or abstracts without ever identifying them.

⁴ Endophoric references are those where interpretation lies within a text.

been used as an anaphoric reference in the letter at different places for the customer “Ms. Musarat Alvi”. Conjunction “and” is used to link the message and this conjunction is used at seven other places and it performs the same function of linking the clauses of the sentences. In the first line of the same paragraph, “it” has been used which is cataphoric and refers to the word ‘complain’ and it will be explained in coming lines that why it was necessary for the customer to complain.

Second paragraph starts with a determiner ‘The’ in ‘the material found’ which acts as an anaphoric and this “the” refers back to the product. Word “its” has been used as a reference which refers back to the material. “We” and “our” refers back to the company again.

Third paragraph is a continuation of the second para where he said that he is going to describe the process in this, words like “this process”, “cooker”, “oil” and “conveyor system” have been linked together to describe the process. “During” is used here to tell further about the cooking process. “Despite” used at this place shows the doubt of the writer about the careful production of the product. “Then” is used in the second line of the 3rd paragraph where it is linking the two sentences and also adding information showing different stages of the procedure. “They” is repeatedly used for the slices; hence, it is an anaphoric reference. Substitution is present in second and third line of 3rd paragraph. Here “they” has been used as substituting pronoun replacing potatoes. It is again used in the 5th line of the same paragraph where it replaces small globules of oil (see App. D).

Next paragraph starts with a word “Unfortunately”. Here the addressee has tried to minimize the effect of the situation by adding the words “however” and “unfortunately”. The words like “on this occasion” and “before” have been used to refer time. In the same para, the process of the procedure has been explained further in which potatoes have changed to crisps. We see a change in vocabulary here.

In the last paragraph, cohesion is seen throughout the paragraph. At this stage he is again relating things to the ones discussed in the beginning. He has used the words “sincere apologies”, “compliments” and “enjoyment” to honor the addressee. Again the words like “we” and “our” are repeated in this para.

In the whole text collocations are present at two places “sincere apologies” and “raw slices”. Ellipsis is also present in the words like “hope” in which “we” has been skipped, “attached” which should be “attached product” (last para, see app. I) and “flavoring” (para 4 see app. I) from which “salt” has been omitted.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): The second approach being used in this assignment for the analysis is CDA. The interdisciplinary analytical viewpoint known as critical discourse analysis seeks to study language as a cultural and social practice, and it is an approach which permits the description and interpretation of social life as it is represented in talk and texts. CDA must not be understood as a single method but as an approach, which contributes itself at different levels.

According to van Dijk [11] CDA focuses particularly on the relationship between power and discourse, studying the way in which social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context.

According to Fairclough [12], the main feature of CDA is its incorporation of linguistic elements into its analysis. He adds that “many CDA scholars regularly use actor analysis as a mean of focusing upon pronouns, attributes and the verbal mode, time”.

CDA has been described as “user centered” by Widdowson [13] and he has placed more emphasis on the intentions of the participants. One of the main purposes of CDA is that the way we write, and what we say is not arbitrary—it is purposeful whether or not the choices are conscious or unconscious [14].

Fairclough and Wodak [15] examined the macro structure of interactions. At macro level they examined lexical loaded items, studying the ideological assumptions that they evoked. The role of pronouns was also emphasized in Chilton and Schaffer’s [16] analysis of a speech.

Criticism of CDA comes from conversational analysis. Schegloff [17] argues that CDA has different goals and interests than the local construction and of interaction. Fairclough [18] in 1996, in an answer to the criticism draws attention to the open-endedness of results essential for the principles of CDA. CDA is more explicit than other approaches in its position and commitment.

Framework of CDA Proposed by Fairclough: The basic framework used in the critical analysis of the texts was proposed by Fairclough [19] who organized the close analysis around the notions of experiential, relational and expressive value and related them to three levels of linguistic study; vocabulary, grammar and textual structure.

In vocabulary, he studied lexical items like collocates, antonyms and over wording also viewed metaphors as crucial in ideological constructions. In grammar he studied the role of active and passive constructions, negative and

positive sentences, modality of the constructions, logical connectors, pronouns. He addressed textual structures. He also related the text structures to social practice.

Now analysis of the data will be done with the help of the second approach. In the start of the analysis we will be presenting the analysis of the logo and the address of the addressee and after that the analysis of the body of the letter will be done. The analysis has been done under different headings for convenience that include; topicalization, grammar and vocabulary.



Letter is typed on the letter pad of the company and logo of the company is displayed at the top of the page. Logo presents a registered trademark. This logo shows that it is a branded company; it has its own identity, individuality and market value. Writing style and colors of the logo also show the individuality of the company.

(Plot No: 413 Sundar Industrial Estate, RAIWIND Road Lahore): Logo of the company is followed by its address. This shows that it is a formal letter. It includes full mailing address but the contact numbers are missing. This may be because they don't want to have phonic contact with its customers. This also shows that it a recognized and authentic company. One may visit and check its existence.

P.C/88/LHR/11 Feb.2010: After the address of the company, letter number is given along with the date. This illustrate that the writer of the letter is a highly professional and keeps a record of all the incoming and outgoing mails. These letter numbers will help the costumer and seller to refer back to their correspondence when needed. This documentation represents the company as a highly principled company, which keeps a record of all correspondence with its customers. The date line is used to indicate the date when the letter was written. It also shows that it is a formal letter. As in formal letters date is given at the top after the address. It can also mean that the company has replied on the date mentioned here and if the addressee receives it late it's not the fault of the company.

Ms. Musarat Yasmin Alvi: Name of the addressee is given. This highlights that this letter has been written to one person and not to whole group. "Ms." Shows that addressee is a female and she might have written a letter and this is a reply to her letter that's why her name is present there. The use of full name along with address term also shows that company is giving honor and respect to her.

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University of Gujrat: Complete address is given which shows that they have paid full attention to the letter. The presence of full address depicts that this letter is a formal letter.

Now we will be doing the analysis of the body of the letter under different headings.

- C Topicalization
- C Grammar
 - C Pronouns
 - C Modality
 - C Passivization
 - C Adjectives
- C Vocabulary
 - C Terms of address
 - C Choice of words

Topicalization: In choosing what to put in the topic position is called Topicalization or simply the first sentence from where the text starts from where the reader can perceive the topic of the discourse (Harweg, 1978). In this letter the first sentence of the letter.

"We write following your recent disappointment with one of our products and we are very sorry it has been necessary for you to complain"

From this line, reader can easily infer that this letter is a reply to the complaint made by the costumer in which writer is expressing his apology for the incident and this topic will be continued in the next paragraphs as well.

Grammar

Pronouns: In this text prominent pronouns that have been used here are "we" and "our". They are first person pronoun used here to refer the whole company; making it a one unit and to give a feeling of direct communication.

This also shows that representator of the company thinks himself as a part of the company and not as a separate individual. But it can be deduced here that the writer does not want to take the responsibility for the incident that happened and thus he is using “we” expressing that it’s not he who is to be blamed but the whole company.

In this letter “we” has been used at three different places and at all places it is used in the same meaning. Similarly the pronoun “ours” has been used at five different places. These both pronouns are used to represent the company.

Modality: In the fifth line of third paragraph (see app. I) modal “may” has been used in a phrase “oil may accumulate”. This refers that this is not a routine matter it is a rarity. It might have happened that crisps absorbed oil in them. In this, the representative of the company is trying to hide the fact what actually happened.

In the first and third line of the last paragraph (see app. I), modal of future commitment “will” is used. The writer wants to keep a good customer-seller relationship and thus he is hoping that even after this event the customer will not stop buying their product.

In the second last line of the last paragraph, modal “might” has been used. This modal is also used for future commitment and writer is giving good gesture by asking the customer that he may replace his purchase item with a new one.

Passivization: By passivization we mean omission of information about agents at the sentence level and is most often achieved by nominalization (converting a verb into a noun) and the use of passive verbs (Harweg, 1978). This feature is present in three different paragraphs (second, third and fourth). In these lines passive verbs have been used omitting the agents. This includes words like “has been identified”, “automatically washed”, and “water is driven”. In all these sentences the agent is omitted and this deletion of the agent is done intentionally by the representative, as he does not want to blame any one for the incident.

Adjectives: This letter is replete with adjectives and these adjectives are very meaningful in the context.

“Recent disappointment” has been used in the very first sentence of the letter. The writer has used this adjective to emphasize the fact that this complaint has been made for the first time and as soon as they have received the complaint they are replying to it. This shows that how much they are concerned with their customers and their complaints.

“500 tones”.....number of the potatoes that are used by the company on daily basis is given in figurative form for emphasis. This has been done deliberately as presence of figures in the text makes it more eye catching and readers will pay attention to it. If instead of “500”, he had used “five hundred” this would not be so attractive and he would not be able to highlight the daily consumption of its company. Similarly if we look at the word, “five minutes” in the same line, where he wants to say that chips stay with oil for five minutes he is not destroying the monotony of the text just to show that five minutes stay of crisps with oil is not a big deal.

Adjectives like “small globules” and “small quantity” has been used to lesser the intensity of the situation.

“Sincere apologies” has been used to show that company has done nothing deliberately and they do not want to hurt their customers and they are loyal with them.

Vocabulary

Terms of Address: Terms of address vary from culture to culture. The choice of address terms depends on the relation of the persons who are having conversation [20]. In this letter the representative has used Ms. for the addressee that shows that they have a formal link with each other and in our culture this “Ms.” is a positive address term for females whom we have never met. He is using second name of the female that also shows level of formality. However if we look at the end of the letter we see that same person has used his own full name without any Mr. or any other title. Here he wants to show a bit close relationship which may help for further correspondence or might have done to lessen the distance between the company and the customer.

Terms of Jargons: Second and third paragraph are full of jargon terms. In these two paragraphs, the addresser of the letter has used the terminology that is not easily understood by a lay man. Terms like “conglomerate of solidified cooking oil, flavoring salt, and conveyer system” are present here. This could be for two reasons. Firstly, to impress the reader and to show that addresser is educated and he know the terms that are used for this procedure. Secondly, the writer has entangled the whole issue in a complex web of words.

Terms of Feelings and Emotions: Words of emotions and feelings have been widely used in the text. The writer has chosen words like “apologies”, “sorry” and “compliments” in order to placate the customer as he himself doesn’t want to further loose the regard of customers. He has given an honor to the customer’s complaints and has called it as a “disappointment”.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have analyzed a formal letter in the light of two different approaches of Discourse Analysis; CDA and Cohesion. In the analysis of the text we have examined different parts of the letter and thus deduced that the letter is well knitted and well structured according to both approaches.

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APPENDIX I:



(Plot No: 413 Sunder Industrial Estate, Raiwind Road Lahore)

P.C/88/LHR
11 Feb. 2010

Ms Musarat Yasmin Alvi
Department of English
Room No. 113, Academics Block
University of Gujrat

Dear Ms Alvi

We write following your recent disappointment with one of our products and we are very sorry it has been necessary for you to complain.

The material found has been identified as a conglomerate of solidified cooking oil, flavoring salt and crisp particles and to explain its presence we will briefly describe our process.

The 500 tonnes of potatoes used daily are automatically washed, peeled and sliced, the raw slices then passing through a cooker where they are cooked for approximately five minutes in vegetable oil. During this process water is driven from the slices and replaced by oil and as the slices exit the cooker they pass over a system which allows excess oil to drain off. Despite this precaution small globules of oil may accumulate and solidify on the subsequent conveyor system from where they are usually very quickly removed.

Unfortunately, however, on this occasion a small quantity of solidified oil has remained with the crisps `picking up` crisp particles and flavouring before subsequently being packed.

We are very sorry this has happened resulting in your concern and hope you will accept our sincere apologies. We also hope that incident will not prevent your continued enjoyment of our product and indeed that you might use the attached to replace your purchase with our compliments.

Yours Sincerely

Jawed Akhter
Consumer Service Supervisor