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A Study of the Language Characteristics of Types of Business English Speeches from the Perspective of Functional Linguistics

Abstract

Business English speeches are an essential form of business communication, and the question of how to improve their effectiveness is essential to successful business communication. Based on a self-built corpus of Business English speeches, this paper studies the relationship of sentence structure, business vocabulary, and speech type with business speeches by using a quantitative statistical method. It reveals that the sentence structure used by the speaker changes according to the content and type of speech, while the proportion of business vocabulary relative to the type of business speech stays at a low level of 5%, with little variance. Sentence structure and the frequency of business vocabulary should be adapted according to the type of speech so that positive effectiveness can be ensured.

Keywords: business English speech; sentence structure; business vocabulary; corpus

1 Introduction

Business speeches are an important form of business communication which present products and services to an audience through voice, gestures, and images. They have been the subject of increased attention, as have Business speeches in English, which have been divided into professional elective courses by the Chinese National Business English Curriculum Guide (2020). Business speeches differ from general speeches. They are characterized by demonstrating views, bringing up problems, suggesting solutions, and paying attention to data and facts (Price, 2013). The scene or type of speech has a close relationship with the speech characteristics (Laws, 2008), in which the relationship between the use of language and speech content is one of the important factors. Previous research on Business English speeches has focused on discourse markers (H. Li, 2016a), vowel marker analysis (Niebuhr & Gonzalez, 2019), and interpersonal meaning construction (H. Li, 2020), but research involving the relationship between the use of utterance and content has yet to be improved. Based on a self-built corpus of business speeches in English, this paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Which sentence structures in Business English speeches illustrate the purpose of the speech?
2. Does the business vocabulary of Business English speeches account for a large proportion of the text of business speeches?

It is revealed through empirical and quantitative research that the sentence structure used by speakers changes according to the content and type of the speech, while the proportion of business vocabulary remains at a relatively low level and varies little according to the different types of business speech.

2 Literature Review

The scope of business speech research literature is extensive and complex. Wang Lifei and Su Yurong (Wang & Su, 2016) investigated the current research status of foreign Business English speeches from 2004 to 2014, and classified it into four categories, according to the data extracted from the corpus: 1) research on business speech type; 2) business speech style and skills; 3) research on business speech content, and 4) business speech teaching and training.

Language structure and intonation are important components of business speeches. Speakers may use multimodal texts to make the speech more accessible to the audience (De Grez et al., 2009). Zanola (2016) argues that public speech, as a special form of conversation, should be adapted to the reactions of the audience. In a business context, the speaker and the listener of the conversation are concerned with the effectiveness and efficiency of the spoken word. Speech is an act of public discourse, and its language is always implicitly provocative and persuasive. By rhetorically analyzing the content of the public discourse of business leaders, Cyphert (2010) summarizes the key insights of influential participants in social decision-making and provides suggestions for solving communication problems in both business and society.

Linguistics corpora have become an important area in Business English speech research, involving ambiguous restriction (H. Li, 2016b), discourse markers (H. Li, 2016a), logical connectives (H. Li, 2017), and interpersonal meaning construction in discourse (H. Li, 2020). In addition, Niebuhr and Gonzalez (2019) used a corpus to analyze the markers from approximately 2,000 long and short vowels selected from representative keynote speech excerpts of both Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg. They found that Jobs' vowels were significantly longer than that of Zuckerberg's, whose vowels were significantly shorter and fewer in number, especially when clarifying business intentions to investors.

The content and type of speech are important factors which influence the use of language, but the division between different perspectives and disciplinary orientations attribute to the diversity and complexity of classifications of speech types. Wang Lifei and Su Yurong (Wang & Su, 2016) pointed out that marketing speeches are a popular topic in foreign business speech research. Cai Qing and Zhou Yuanyuan (Cai & Zhou, 2007) divided business speeches into four categories: Briefing Presentations, Training Presentations, Sales Presentations, and Motivational Presentations. Based on content analysis, Hess and Pearson (1991) found that textbooks pay more attention to persuasive speeches and informative speeches, and less attention to speech methods, viewpoint statements, and speech practice. Zhang Jiatai (Zhang, 1999) believed that, in terms of content, speeches can be divided into political speeches, social life speeches, judicial speeches, and academic speeches; in terms of form, they can be divided into reading speeches, reciting speeches, outline speeches, and impromptu speeches. Sun Yuru (Sun, 2003) divided speeches into three categories: form, content, and function. From the functional point of view, speeches are divided into illustrative speeches, persuasive speeches, provocative speeches, agitative speeches, and recreational speeches. Liu Hongyan (Liu, 2013) classified speeches into three types: informative, persuasive, and speeches for special occasions, and further subdivided them into the categories of sales, award, training, toasting, guest introduction, and others. The famous TED speeches are classified into technology, entertainment, and design. See the summaries in Table 1.

Based on Table 1, it can be observed that the classification of business speeches involves three levels: content, form, and function, along with the following characteristics: 1) The distinction between business speeches and general speeches is not clear-cut. For example, speeches such as political speeches and reception toasts are still classified as business speeches; 2) Some speech types in the table fail to convey the core of business communication, which is the presentation of products, ideas, and strategies. To divide Business English speeches into 'informative' and 'provocative' speeches simply cannot accommodate or cover such business characteristics as 'marketing' and 'decision-making'. Therefore, for the sake of the genuine nature of Business English speeches, we propose a division into five types: promotion speeches, skills training speeches, sales speeches, decision-making speeches, and problem-solving speeches.

Table 1. Classification of Speeches.

Author	Type of Speeches				
Wang Lifei	Marketing	Informative	Persuasive		
Cai Qing & Zhou Yuanyuan	Briefing	Training	Sales	Motivation	
Sun Jiatai	Politics	Social life	Academic	Impromptu	Recitation
Hess & Pearson	Persuasive	Informative			
Sun Yuru	Illustrative	Persuasive	Provocative	Agitative	Recreational
Liu Hongyan	Informative	Persuasive	Special occasion		
TED	Technology	Entertainment	Design		

The classification of business speeches affects the language characteristics of speakers. Colin Clark (2008) studied the relationship between the level of interest in business angel investors and the quality and content of entrepreneurs' statements. He found that the influence of expressive factors in an entrepreneur's speech outweighs non-expressive factors. In particular, clear and understandable language styles combined with useful information can significantly increase an investor's interest.

3 Theoretical Foundation

Language Expectancy Theory-LET The language expectancy theory (LET) stresses that people develop normative expectations with regard to appropriate communication styles in certain scenarios (Burgoon & Miller, 1985). People encode the language style of prior utterances, if affected, into their communication styles. As an information-centered theory used in persuasion, it describes how the level of language style of a prior utterance affects the cognition post-utterance, thus leading to the probability of language style synchronicity. In other words, the language style a person will choose to encode is congruent with the prior language style; the more strongly one's attention focus rests on the style, "the more intense he will be stating it" (Burgoon et al., 2002; Averbek & Miller, 2014).

LET can be used to predict how message features such as sentence structure or word choice positively or negatively influence the expectations of recipients (Averbek & Miller, 2014). Changing expectations will enhance or mitigate the effectiveness of the message whereby a given message will be incrementally enhanced, sharpening the recipients' acceptance (Lee & Yu, 2020). Additionally, unexpected language usage may influence the behavior of the receiver due to the effect it has on the persuasive message. According to LET, peripheral elements of language style, such as the specificity and precision of the influencer, psychological closeness, and interaction with the audience, can greatly influence the persuasiveness of a speech. In particular, the stronger a person's sense of perception is in a positive context of involvement, the more he will change his personal attitude to accommodate the public communication (Burgoon & Miller, 1985).

Systemic-Functional Linguistics The purpose of Business English speech is to sell goods or services by means of a special form of communication. Systemic-functional linguistics, proposed by Halliday, argues that the function of language outweighs its form due to the fact that language shows its significance in terms of functions, instead of any fixed form. Systemic-functional linguistics is composed of three meta-functions: ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function (Halliday, 1985). Of these, the interpersonal function is frequently used to maintain dynamic social relations between the speaker and the listener, which covers the business speeches studied in this paper.

Business English is one of those active subjects applied to functional linguistics. Functional linguistics is generally utilized according to different discourses. In spoken discourse, Chu (2015) studied the interpersonal meaning of modality in oral Business English negotiation by analyzing verbs, adjuncts, and metaphors; Ponomarenko and Malyuga (2012) helped students cultivate a more systemic and meaningful perception of speech in the process of practical English teaching. In written discourse, Xu (2010) discussed the language characteristics of Business English sales contracts of foreign trade from a functional linguistics perspective. In listening and speaking discourse, Li (T. Z. Li, 2012) analyzed Business English listening and speaking materials through the prism of functional linguistics theory. Therefore, under the guidelines of functional linguistics, the function of Business English, which is to deliver an effective and communicative speech, can be optimized.

4 Methodology

Corpus Construction According to Douglas Bieber’s corpus construction principle, we collected various types of Business English speeches on YouTube and other websites and then built a corpus containing 41 Business English speech videos and 28 speech texts. The videos were converted into texts through the phonetic transcription function of the IFLYTEK Hear application (non-subtitled videos) or by downloading speech subtitles (subtitled videos).

Research Tools The tools used in this study were PowerG REP text collator, WordSmith Tools 8.0 corpus retrieval software, CorpusWordParser word segmentation labeling software, and the phonetic transcription function of the IFLYTEK Hear application. We utilized PowerG REP text collator to organize line skip, space, full-width and half-width characters, and applied WordSmith Tools 8.0 corpus retrieval software and CorpusWordParser word segmentation labeling software to label and calculate sentence types and professional vocabulary in five speech types. In addition, we used the phonetic transcription function of the IFLYTEK Hear application to convert the subtitles of the business speech videos before manually proofreading the texts.

Methods and Contents This paper combines quantitative statistics and qualitative analysis, focusing on the following three questions: 1) What is the relationship between speech type and sentence structure? 2) Does professional vocabulary change according to the type of Business English speech? 3) If so, what is the ratio?

5 Findings and Discussion — Linguistic Characteristics of Business English Speeches

General Characteristics of Sentence Structure Generally speaking, English sentence structures are divided into simple sentences, compound sentences, and complex sentences (Zhao, 1999). There is a connection between sentence structure and language expression. The scope of sentence structure research has shifted from “sentence grammar” of the sentence itself to “text analysis” (Huang, 2009). However, we will also encounter long sentences featuring the characteristics of compound sentences and complex sentences. Therefore, we divided the sentences from the speech into four categories: simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences. Based on these categories, we analyzed the sentences collected in the self-built corpus and found that simple sentences account for 47.45%, compound sentences 22.45%, complex sentences 16.56%, and compound-complex sentences 13.54%. See Figure 1.

As a whole, regardless of the type of business speech, simple sentences (47.45%) appear more than twice as often as compound sentences (22.45%), which shows that business speeches focus on products or concepts to transmit more understandable information and facts to the audience.

Figure 1. Total proportion of sentence structure in the corpus.

In addition, the audience's auditory sense is the main sense used to receive information during speeches, so speakers should ensure that the information delivered via spoken language can be immediately understood by the audience. The general characteristics of the speeches are the use of short sentences, concision, and clarity.

Speech Type and Sentence Structure Based on the self-built corpus, we annotated and analyzed the speech content to obtain the proportion of the four sentence structures among the five speech types, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentage of four sentence structure in five speech types (%).

	Simple Sentence	Compound Complex Sentence	Complex Sentence	Compound Sentence
Promotion	47.85	13.74	14.59	23.82
Sales	52.77	7.64	15.98	23.61
Skills Training	49.17	12.88	17.41	20.54
Decision-making	34.43	22.94	8.20	34.43
Problem-Solving	42.34	16.42	16.79	24.45

In the sequence of promotion, sales, skills training, decision-making, and problem-solving speeches, the linear regression ($Y = -2.936X + 54.12$, $R^2 = 0.4221$) is utilized to analyze simple sentences among the five speech types, as shown in Figure 2. It can be noted that the frequency of simple sentences in the five speech types decreases gradually, while decision-making and problem-solving speeches are significantly different from the other three types (promotion, sales, and skills training). The results show that decision-making and problem-solving speeches require more complex logical relationships than other speeches, which may simply involve "instilling" information in the audience. As Figure 3 demonstrates, the frequency of compound sentences in decision-making and problem-solving speeches is higher than in the others, due to the fact that compound sentences

are capable of delivering complex content. Therefore, it is clear that in the five speech types simple sentences are frequently used in promotion, sales, and skills training speeches, while compound sentences are used in decision-making and problem-solving speeches. This may offer prospects for further research. See Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Figure 2. Linear regression of the proportion of simple sentence.

Figure 3. Linear regression of the proportion of compound sentence.

Halliday, who proposed System-Functional Linguistics, believed that the use of language embodies certain functions and goals. In his theory, language can be regarded as one of the resources of human communication to explore how people use language to express their thoughts and to achieve the purposes of communication. The word “how” also refers to the method for realizing the language function of the speaker. In other words, the function of language determines the form

of language. Although the basic features of business speeches are concision, clarity, and the direct expression of products and ideas, the features may change along with the type of speech. Specifically, promotion, sales, and skills training speeches share many similarities, while decision-making and problem-solving speeches are significantly different from the others. In sales speeches, the audience generally does not have much patience to learn about the details of products or service but instead pays more attention to the advantages of products and the potential benefits they can obtain. Therefore, sales speeches should use more straightforward and understandable sentence structures in order to quickly penetrate key information into the audience's mind. Decision-making and problem-solving speeches require that more attention be paid to the logic and facts of persuasion so as to try to make the audience understand and accept their own ideas, which highlights "reasonable persuasion" without leaving a compulsive impression on them.

Speech Type and Professional Vocabulary Business speeches involve the use of professional vocabulary, but how can varieties of professional vocabulary be used to keep the audience interested while achieving certain speech purposes? Business speeches mostly relate to trade, commerce, marketing, and other theoretical and practical areas. In business speeches, excessive use of technical vocabulary should be avoided in order not to lose the audience's interest. It is particularly important to balance the proportion of professional vocabulary with more common words. Relatively speaking, professional vocabulary is more frequently used in business speeches than in general public speeches. Professional vocabulary includes not only professional business terminology, but also words used in combination with professional words. For example, the phrase "issue a letter of credit". A letter of credit is a professional term in commerce, and 'issue' as its collocate should also be defined as a professional word. Based on the five speech types, we analyzed the proportion of professional vocabulary in the five categories, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Percentage of professional vocabulary in five speech types.

	Promotion	Skills training	Sales	Decision-Making	Problem-Solving
Percentage of Professional Vocabulary	4.43%	2.72%	4.90%	4.89%	4.91%

In the five business speech types, although the use of professional vocabulary is slightly different, the overall level remains in the range of 4%–5%, excluding skills training speeches. This shows that the use of professional vocabulary does not change greatly according to the type of speech. Instead, all types of speech (except for skills training speeches) contain between 4%–5% professional vocabulary, which is to say that there are 4 or 5 professional words in every 100 words on average.

6 Conclusions

Business English speeches are an important branch of spoken communication. Business speeches cover many disciplines such as media, management, language, and behavior. However, most of the relevant research focuses on media and behavior, and research from the perspective of linguistics is scarce. Language features such as sentence structure and vocabulary are critical components of a successful business speech, which can improve the persuasiveness and impact of a speech.

This paper claims that since the main purpose of Business English speeches is to exert an influence on business activities and to promote products and ideas, it would be practical to renew their classification. Therefore, we have classified Business English speeches into five types of

speeches: promotion speeches, skills training speeches, sales speeches, decision-making speeches, and problem-solving speeches. Through quantitative analysis, this paper has found that, based on the proposed classification, sentence structure business speeches change according to the type of speech. The percentage of simple sentence, compound sentence, and complex sentence use is strongly correlated to the specific type of business speech. We also studied the usage of business vocabulary (not specialized vocabulary) and found that the proportion of business vocabulary in relation to the total number of words in speeches remains stable at 4%-5%. In general, the type of speech and the ratio of different sentence structures are the two elements that should be balanced accordingly, while business vocabulary is less significant in preparing and giving business presentations. These findings are helpful to the strategy of language restructure, and further improve the effectiveness of Business English speech practice and teaching.

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The publication was financed at the authors' expense.

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Both the authors participated equally in preparing conception and academic editing of this article.

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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

Publishing history: Received 2020-08-16; Accepted 2021-03-01; Published 2021-10-11.