
Comments On Business Correspondence

In Japan

by Seizo Murakami

Preface

One of the problems discussed in business English in this country is the difference between British and American expressions. And at present the greater part of the scholars seem to be in favor of the British ways of expression. Chiefly because most people in Europe, Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and in South-West Asia use British English in their correspondence. One of the leading scholars wrote to me that his pupils working in a first-class trading company wrote 100,000 letters every day in British English and received as many letters in the same language. So some scholars believe that in near future the British type will overwhelmingly predominate Japan's trading circle.

Notwithstanding, I want to stress the importance of American way of writing business letters for the reasons, mentioned below, partly because the American way of expression has recently had a great influence on that of English people. A Londoner who long used to write business letters lately wrote to me, granting this trend and giving some examples of their Americanized ways of writing. Moreover, it is not only justifiable but even to be encouraged to adopt some of the American ways of expression to our business letters as far as the following respects are concerned. From this point of view I even dared to criticize several parts of the letters written by some leading scholars in Japan in the last two chapters of this article.

1. English-Speaking People's Errors in their Letters

In Japan we have no authorized types or forms in writing letters, while in England and in America there are many publicly-approved forms or arrangements of how to write letters—especially business letters. At the annual conference of Japan Business English Association held in Tokyo last year, a lady teacher of Tokyo Women's College, who had studied business English in America, spoke how many Americans made mistakes in their business letters. Her group students found 75 to 85% errors among American business letters, she said. How much more Japanese students, to whom English is quite foreign, are apt to make mistakes in writing English letters!

2. The Two Big Trends of Letter-Writing

As Shakespeare puts it, "Brevity is the soul of wit." Simplicity and time saving are the two big trends of letter-writing today, though brevity should not breach courtesy.

Even a tedious, dull, unclear conversation will be listened to with patience for courtesy's sake. The listener can even ask for explanations when not clear. But the reader of a letter need not feel any such courtesy. He may throw away the letter. So a good letter-writer must carefully think over the draft and phrase ideas more effectively in writing than in talking.

Wordy and ineffective

Improved expression, grasping the point

(1)

(1)

Spring will soon be here. About this time of the year weather is

In these early spring days when it's raining in the morning but

quite changeable. In the morning we often have rain, while in the afternoon cold and clear weather. In order to be safe it would be better for you to carry both a topcoat and a raincoat with you every day. But that's a bother. Here serves you our VW Topcoat! It serves you not only as a topcoat but also as a raincoat.

(2)

We have received your request for the Literature of our Improved Lawn Mower.

It was primarily prepared for the experimental farms in this country. So we were not prepared for numerous requests we have received from those taking care of their home gardens.

However, we are sending one and hope it will be of help to you.

If there is any other way we can help you, please do not hesitate to call on us.

clearer and colder in the afternoon, Our VW Topcoat which is also a raincoat will protect you to and from work without your having to worry each morning over "Which shall I take today?"

(2)

Here is the Literature of our Improved Lawn Mower you asked for.

It was prepared after extensive research by our own engineers with the assistance of outside specialists. We are sure you will find it useful to your garden.

Call on us any time when you think we can help you.

3. Selection of Words

Some ten years ago in a British Direct Mail Association contest for

the best sales letter of the year, a British European Airways letter written on behalf of Aer Lingus Company was awarded the first prize. It reads :

Since you live in one of the most beautiful countries of England and have the sea nearby, you may consider it impossible to better your surroundings for a holiday. Have you ever been to Ireland? Whether the answer is yes or no, I am sure you will get a thrill out of browsing through this colourful booklet.

You will realize two points immediately. Ireland is certainly not a place to leave out of your thoughts for this year's holiday and secondly, Ireland is so easy to reach by Aer Lingus — quite cheap too. In all probability you have often just thought about going over there but never really got down to getting a few facts about the place.

Well, here are the facts and all you have to do now is to contact your usual Travel Agent or cut out the form on the back page of the booklet and post it today to Aer Lingus, 174 Regent Street, W.1.

So commences a wonderful holiday. (S.Stevens : Business in
English p. 100)

This letter won the prize because it passed three tests. The first test was to count the number of abstracts which do not appeal to the external senses. Except for five abstracts, this letter used concrete terms. The second test was the number of words with four or more syllables, which were only three in the letter — "impossible", "immediately", "probability". The final check was how many words were found which "the List of the Thousand Most Common Words" did not contain. Only nine words were not on the list, out of which, "impossible", "thrill", and "browsing" would be quite ordinary.

4. Difference between American Sales Letters and British Ones

Sydney Stevens criticizes American business letters :

In the U. S. A. sales letters are sometimes written in a style that is intended to shock or startle the reader into making him read them. "Before you put this letter in the wastepaper basket....." is an example of the kind of opening used in this type of letter; or a sales letter extolling the merits of a brand of drink might begin : "Did you wake up with a fat head this morning?" These methods are not so popular in England, where *a more restrained and dignified style is preferred.*

It is still possible, however, to write a letter that will impress or be remembered, without using shock tactics or vulgarity. (Ibid.p.530)

In response to this British criticism, Prof. Menning and Wilkinson say: "Even in its best sense, formal English is nearly always unsuitable for business letters. It would be noticed as inappropriate in all but the most formal occasions. An easy way to choose the appropriate level of usage is to ask yourself which type of dress would be most suitable if you were going to see your reader and talk your message to him. If the answer is an everyday business suit, use the broad middle ground of informal English. Only if you are the kind of person who goes to church in dirty work clothes, should you feel comfortable while revealing your illiteracy by violating the writing conventions expected of educated people?" This opinion might make us think of the so-called "contextual ethics" in modern American theology.

Among correspondents it is well-known to say "every letter is a sales letter and it should be a talking letter too." Here Menning and Wilkinson add: "Informal English is for more useful level for letters. In it, the writer's interest is more on contents than on style. The emphasis is more on being functional than on being elegant. Its general tone is that of the natural speech of educated people in their usual business and social affairs. In its written form it is more concise and more precise than normal conversation; but its vocabulary, phrasing, sentence structure, grammar, and hence its natural rhythm and tone are essentially the same as in good con-

versation among educated people. (Menning : pp.50,51)

5. Why Archaic, Bromidic Style Still Remains in the Present Day Business English ?

It is traced back to the times when businessmen first began to have social status enough to write to kings, princes, and others at court. *Feeling inferior, they developed a slavish, stilted, and elaborately polite style to flatter the nobility.* They "begged to advise" the nobleman that his "kind favor of recent date was "at hand" and "wished to state" that this matter would "receive our prompt attention" and "begged to remain your humble, obedient servant." Today businessmen needn't utterly be so meek. Still they just use like expressions unthinkingly. (See Menning p.42)

At any rate, avoid overused, shopworn phrases. Nobody enjoys a stereotyped letter. Keep your letter as short, simple, and fresh as possible.

Traditional letter styles often prolong the letter ineffectively. It is warmth and not flowery phrases that conveys goodwill and favorable response to the reader, though we can by no means ignore the useful and valuable phase of the traditional letter styles.

6. The Beginning and the Ending of Letters

The first and the last paragraphs of a letter are most important. The writer must straightforwardly enter into the essential point of the business from the beginning in order to win the reader's attention. This opening will decide whether he reads on or tosses your letter into the wastebasket. So it must be brief, attractive, and appropriate. A long paragraph is heavy and uninviting, the first paragraph should always be short.

The last paragraph of a sales letter must lead the reader from conviction to action. Out of consideration for the reader and in order to

elicit desirable response, the closing of the letter should also be simplified and effective enough to put him into action. So the last paragraph should also be brief yet attractive and impress the reader favorably with the writer's goodwill.

About beginning with a participial structure in either paragraph is not commendable. As feudal age remnants, many business letter writers often begin with participial constructions. But by doing so they make the first and the last paragraphs the longer, the weaker, or ambiguous, superfluous in meaning.

For example :

The first paragraph

Thanking you for your nice letter of September 15 inquiring about our pharmaceutical goods, we are pleased to send you one of our catalogs.



Thank you for your letter of Sept. 15. We are sending you one of our pharmaceutical catalogs in reply to your inquiry.

Besides, according to Mr. Shinzo Hoshi, lecturer of Waseda University, only a quarter of the contemporary writers' works have opening sentences beginning with participial or inverted constructions, adverb phrases, etc. Especially participial constructions are very rare.

They are now too trite and threadbare to attract attention.

(His Mistakable English Expressions p. 131)

Notwithstanding I have seen many such undesirable beginnings in the books published recently in Japan. Those I have noticed are as follows :

The last paragraph

Thanking you again for your initial order, we are looking forward to doing further business with you.



We look forward to having long and pleasant relations with you.

(the first paragraphs)

- (Mr. A. p. 30) Following up our letter of May 20 ...
→ From the context this part had better be stricken out.
- (Ibid. p. 34) Wishing to extend our business of commission agent ...
→ As we wish ...
- (Ibid. p. 60) Replying to your inquiry of the 10th inst.
→ In reply to your inquiry ...
- (Mr. B. p. 31) Replying to your letter ... Hoping it will be of use ...
- (Ibid. p. 32) Having heard your name and address ...
Selecting from your catalogue sent on July 15 ...
- (Mr. C. pp. 115
187) Having heard that ...
- (Ibid. p. 187) Replying to your letter ...

(the last paragraphs)

- (Mr. A. p. 31) Thanking you in advance → better to be omitted.
- (Ibid. p. 80) Hoping your active cooperation ...
- (Ibid. p. 81) Trusting you will give this order your prompt and careful attention ...
- (Ibid. pp. 82, 83) Awaiting your reply ... , we are
- (Mr. B. p. 12) Thanking you, we are ...
- (Ibid. p. 31) Hoping it will be of use to you we ask you ...
- (Ibid. p. 57) Awaiting your favourable reply ... , we are
- (Mr. C. p. 42) Looking forward to receiving your news ...
- (Ibid. p. 44) Hoping to have your good news in the very near future,
we remain, dear Sirs,
- (Ibid. p. 69) Awaiting your reply at an early date ...
- (Ibid. p. 74) Assuring you of our sincere desire to serve you ...

(Ibid. p. 87) Assuring you of our cooperation at all times, ...

(Ibid. p. 99) Looking forward to receiving your favourable answer ...

(Ibid. p. 103) Trusting to hear from you soon, we remain, ...

As Mr. Ryuzo Okubo says in his book, all such closings had better be omitted unless the letters are very formal.

7. How to avoid Disappointing Messages

A bad news-, a refusal-, a claim-, and a collection-letter (especially when much overdue) are quite apt to hurt the reader's feeling.

Necessity of "Buffer" — a shock-absorber

First begin your letter with a pleasant comment. Before stating the refusal or apology, first mention the justifying reason why you are obliged to refuse the reader's proposal or request. If you start your letter with your flat refusal, it appears to ignore the reader's feelings or his situation and so whatever you may say later he will close his mind to what you say. Show yourself you can think in the reader's situation with sympathy and understanding, which will cause him to remain your customer.

Never finish your letter with disappointing remarks but with a friendly attitude, giving some suggestion of being helpful in other ways. The above way of writing is so called buffer beginning and buffer ending. And at the same time this is "you-attitude or you-viewpoint letter" in the true sense of the words. The spirit of "you-attitude" could be far more effectively realized by goodwill through a sincere tone and service attitude than merely by the word order.

8. Positives instead of Negatives

So always try to give the reader the picture of your pleasant, cheerful attitude. It is especially important since the reader cannot see you. In order to give him this impression, keep a positive instead of a negative attitude in writing whenever possible. This attitude, when effectively used, will lead the reader to action, which is the main purpose of a business letter. Negatives usually give him dark, unpleasant impression. You can't be "sorry" about something without recalling the initial unhappy experience. You can't write "unfortunately" without restating some gloomy aspect of a situation. Nor can you write in terms of "delay", "broken", "damages", "unable to", "cannot", "inconvenience", "difficulty", "disappointment", and other negatives without stressing some element of the situation which makes your reader react *against* you rather than *with* you. (See Menning : p. 74)

Negative

(1)

we *regret* to say that we *cannot* supply you with the goods by September 15.

(2)

We shall most *reluctantly* have to *delay* your order of September 1, for you *didn't mention* what kind of blue you want in your order. Kindly check our catalog and let us know the right color you want.

Positive

(1)

We can definitely assure you of forwarding the goods by September 30.

(2)

We want to have you entirely satisfied with the blue shirts you ordered on Sept. 1. Will you please let us know the exact color you prefer. You may get smart shirts in navy, midnight, or light blue. All are popular now. Just

check on the enclosed blank card.
On receiving it, we will send you
the right shirts you desire.

9. Questions of Substance

In the light of the goodwill messages mentioned above, I am dubious about various sentences and phrases given in the books of some Japanese authors. Let me give several examples here and suggest how to change them :

(Mr. A. p. 94)

"To our surprise, a bill drawn by you on us for the Galvanized Iron Sheet shipped by s/s "Monroe" was presented today for acceptance.

We naturally *refused* to accept the bill, because we requested you to forward these goods on consignment, and therefore *gave you no authority* to draw upon us.

We must ask you in future *to be more careful* not to repeat *such troubles.*"

changed suggestion : A bill drawn by you on us for the Galvanized Iron Sheet shipped by s/s "Monroe" was presented today for acceptance.

Will you, however, please remember the agreement we have made. It was only on consignment that we requested you to forward these goods.

Let us talk over the matter so as to fully understand each other before we settle it financially.

(Mr. C. p. 30)

"I am confident that a trial order would *win you further custom,* and I should be grateful for an opportunity to prove the truth of this *claim.*"

changed suggestion : Please give us just a trial order and it will prove the truth of what we said above.

(The text sounds too self-conceited, and "claim" is not to be used in the

sense of assertion or maintenance.)

(Ibid. p. 156)

“We trust that all may be found in order, and that the cases may reach you safely, and in good condition.”

changed suggestion : Omit the whole sentence, for from the context it is needless.

(Ibid. p. 171)

“It is *with regret* and certain amount of *surprise* that we find *you have not yet delivered* the goods ordered two months ago. Should *you fail in your obligation, ...*”

changed suggestion : We wonder why the goods we ordered two months ago have not reached us.

(Mr. B. pp. 122, 123)

The following quotations require changes not only in wording but also in the order of paragraphing.

¶ 1. “We very much regret that we failed to keep our promise of making punctual delivery of 300 gross of cultured pearls as stipulated in L/C No. 124.

¶ 2. As a matter of fact, the recent flood was a big blow to the woodbase factory causing disshape of the woodbodies by muddy water. Quite unwillingly we were compelled to ask you for an extention of validity of the L/C by cable as per enclosed copy.

¶ 3. We have today received your advice of July 30 stating that the L/C No. 124 has been duly extended to August 31, 19--.

¶ 4. Now, everything is in good order and further delay will never happen. We wish to add that the carrying vessel, Hankyu Maru of N.S.K. is the fastest boat on the New York line, and can save seven days en route as compared with an ordinary vessel.”

comments : The first paragraph beginning with “We very much regret that we failed ...” may give unfavorable impression even though talking of

his own. The third paragraph is to be put at the beginning with thanks for the extension of validity of the L/C. In the text no thanks are mentioned.

changed suggestion : We have, with heartfelt thanks, received today your letter of July 30 telling that the L/C No. 124 has been extended to August 31, 19 -- .

We are shipping 300 gross of cultured pearls in three weeks.

(In the text the writer refers only to the delay of the shipment and not to the date when the goods will be forwarded.)

As you roughly know from our cable, the recent flood was ...

(¶ 2 of the text is to be put here.)

¶ 4. (Just as it is in the text.)

comments : The reader has extended the validity of the L/C because he knew from the cable the reason of the impossibility of making punctual delivery of his order. And in this letter why the unavoidable delay of shipment was made is repeated in more detailed way. That is the reason why it has been put towards the end instead of at the beginning.

(Ibid. p. 126)

"We are at a loss to understand why we have not heard from you. We must ask you to carry out our orders more carefully in future."

comments : Both sentences are sharp diction reproaching the reader. In order to give the reader as favorable impression as possible, it would be better to change them to those of gentler tones.

(Ibid. p. 127)

"We started doing business with you at the beginning of this year, and were very pleased to receive prompt delivery.

comments : This is an exemplary, good beginning of a claim letter.

(Mr. D. p. 5)

" (1) We *acknowledge receipt* with thanks of your *favour* of the 21st *inst.*, contents of which have *duly* been noted.

In reply, we would assure you that the matter in question shall be given our full attention *in conformity with* your *esteemed* suggestions stressed in detail in your above letter.

(2) *Yours 21st inst. to hand.* Suggestions are noted and we will act just as you state.

(3) We thank you for your letter of 21st *instant*. Please be assured that we shall be guided accordingly and the matter attended to as suggested."

the author's note : (1) is archaic and too polite and even boring. (2) is American-like yet rather rude. (3) is concise, modest, and courteous and the best of the three.

comments : I wonder if the author thinks the simplest and the shortest letter is an American way of writing irrespective of the word usage. I think the following would still be better than (3) : We thank you for your letter of 21st August. We shall deal with the matter just as you suggested.

(Ibid. p. 44)

"It would be rather disadvantageous for you to quote to several people at the same time."

comments : The reader could do anything he likes. The writer has no right to meddle in the reader's business, unless there is some agreement between them not to quote to other firms at the same time.

(Ibid. p. 47)

"It is with regret that you have missed the golden opportunity."

comments : To say what is too late serves only to disappoint the reader. It would be better to leave this unsaid, unless some good alternative is suggested later.

(Ibid. p. 47)

"We are greatly disappointed that you have not sold your stock."

comments : It sounds like reproaching the reader. It might also well be

left unsaid.

(Ibid. p. 48)

“Therefore your application is most reluctantly turned down.”
changed suggestion : So we wish we could accept your application some other time if possible.

(Ibid. 48)

“We regret there is no alternative but to most respectfully refuse your claim.”

comments : Find some other expression in an affirmative sentence.

(Ibid. p. 54)

We assure you that this will be attended to without delay.

changed suggestion : We are sure to attend to this as soon as possible.

(Ibid. p. 55)

The damage, we are afraid, is attributable to *negligence on your part*.

Negligence on your part, we are afraid, is apparently to blame for the damage.

changed suggestion : Only if it had been attended to more carefully, no such damage would have been inflicted on. We believe you will be careful enough in future.

comments : Blamable words sound milder if they are expressed in passive voices.

(Ibid. p. 109)

It would *be of interest to you*, however, that one of our competitors here actually concluded a contract at this level of price last week with a certain shipper on your side for 300 bales, similar quality.

comments : The italicized part sounds ironical to the reader, so it would be better to cut it off.

10. Hackneyed or Verbose Words

This chapter owes much to Parkhurst's Business Communication Chapter 3, Menning and Wilkinson's Communicating through Letters and Reports Chapter 2 and Prof. Sukeo Kitazawa's Advanced Course in Business English. Especially the last book criticizes archaic, hackneyed, wordy usage of words and shows how to make compact, clear, characteristic, and coherent letters. This is done in comparison with letters lacking such important elements. It also describes the right arrangement of important sentences and less important ones, with scrupulous care.

This author's English seems to be chiefly based on American English. It gives him a rather isolated place in Japan's business English world, because it seems that wordy, stereotyped English is still prevalent among the scholars concerned. However, it delights me to notice that among recently published books, trite archaic English is gradually disappearing. Mr. Haneda's inclination seems somewhat akin to that of Mr. Kitazawa. (Mr. A. pp. 15, 51, 55, 97)

Your *respectable* house → Your house

Your letter of *the 20th May as under* (This letter is addressed to a firm in U. S. A.) → Your letter of May 20 as follows :
(Ibid. p. 31)

We hope you will attend to this matter *without delay*.
→ Please attend to this matter as soon as possible.

(Ibid. pp. 44, 88)

In compliance with your request → As requested
(Ibid. p. 45)

the Price List enclosed *herewith* → Omit "herewith."
(Ibid. pp. 48, 53)

as per a copy of our cable inclosed
→ as you see in a copy of our cable
(Ibid. p. 51)

without loss of time → immediately

(Ibid. p. 60)

your inquiry of the 10th *inst.* → 10th September

(Ibid. p. 61)

your inquiry of the 20th *ult.* → 20th August

(Ibid. p. 66)

you may rest assured that ... → Omit all the words.

(Ibid. pp. 76, 80)

We hope you will *be good enough to give* ... → Please give ...

(Ibid. p. 93)

the goods will reach you *in due course of time* ...

→ Say, in a couple of days; in a week; etc.

at an early date → soon

(Mr. C. pp. 46, 143, 181)

Permit me to introduce to you (or *to your acquaintance*)

→ May I introduce to you or I have the pleasure to introduce to you ...

(Ibid. p. 29)

your *favour* dated the 10th April is *at hand*.

→ Many thanks for your letter of 10th April.

(Ibid. p. 29)

at your earliest convenience → as soon as possible

We shall *esteem it an honour* if ...

→ We shall be very glad if ...

Your immediate answer *will oblige*.

→ Please let us have your answer immediately

the truth of this *claim* → the truth of this assertion (See above.)

(Ibid. pp. 32, 35, 133)

your *esteemed* enquiries,; your *valued* custom

→ Omit the italic words.

(Ibid. p. 58)

we might be in a position to quote on *same* → them

(Ibid. p. 64)

Enclosed *please find* the samples → Enclosed are the samples

(Ibid. p. 68)

In compliance with your request → See above.

(Ibid. pp. 144, 153, 155)

We *acknowledge receipt of your favour* ...

We *are in receipt of your esteemed* letter ...

→ We have much appreciated your letter of ...

(Ibid. p. 156)

In conformity with the request of your Tokyo correspondent ...

→ As your Tokyo correspondent requested ...

(Mr. D. p. 4)

I take the liberty to write to you ...

→ I have the pleasure of writing to you ...

(Ibid. p. 17)

"The full address should be written only on the envelope ..."

→ The inside address should be quite the same as that of the envelope.

(Ibid. pp. 17, 21)

Messrs. Overseas Trading Co., Ltd.

changed suggestion : Messrs. is to be omitted because Messrs. is prefixed to a company only when it consists of a person's name and his company or persons' names, such as Messrs. Johnson & Company, Messrs. Wilson & Sons, Ltd., Messrs. Madison & Galley Company.

Even when a person's name is included in the name of a company, if it is followed by a noun denoting a kind of business, then we cannot prefix it with "Messrs.", such as Eastman Kodak Company, McCall Chemicals Inc. Some authors prefer putting "The" instead of "Messrs." when "Messrs." cannot be prefixed to it. However, "The" had better not be put unless the company's own name has it. Thus we say "the Bank of Tokyo"

but "Taiyo Fisheries Company."

(Ibid. p. 18)

It is overwhelmingly frequent to write the body of a letter in indented style. When the envelope address is written in indented style, the inside address is written in the same form.

changed suggestion : Today in USA, block style is quite common. In America even when the inside address is written in block style, the body of a letter is often written in indented style. Yet at present most Americans write the envelope address, the inside address, and the body of the letter all in block style.

(Ibid. pp. 42, 57)

Please rest assured that the matter will be attended to as instructed.

→ We shall certainly attend to the matter as you instructed.

(Ibid. p. 46)

Our manufacturers are *duly* informed of your comment contained *therein*. ...

→ Omit "duly". "therein" → in it.

References : Communicating through Letters and Reports by Menning
and Wilkinson

Business Communication by Parkhurst

Business in English by Sydney Stevens

The Business & Home Letter-Writer edited by Frederick
Wame & Company

Effective Business Correspondence by Abraham Ellenbogen

The Japanese books I quoted here are all of recent edition and some are of 12th to 17th edition. They are all so popular and are used by many students and young clerks of foreign trading firms in Japan.