

An Analysis of 'Tongzhi' or 'Circular Letters' Genre in Chinese Business Communication

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1 Introduction.

This paper explores sales 'tongzhi' or 'circular letters' employed in business communication in China today. 'Tongzhi' literally means to inform, but 'tongzhi' as a genre in business writing represent more speech acts than informing. According to Liang et al (1992:230), 'tongzhi' is mainly used as 'xiangxing' (↓) genre from the superior to the subordinates; and it can be also used as 'pingxing' (↔) genre equals writing to each other. In business communication, these two types are both employed. However the 'pingxing' genre is more frequently used, which reveals a fundamental change in the language development with the change of society towards the market economy. On the other hand, government owned enterprises are still exercising control over the management of subordinate companies. The higher-level enterprises or organisations will use 'tongzhi' to give instructions or orders to the subordinate companies. On the other hand, the enterprises or companies who do not have a superior-subordinate relationship will also employ the 'tongzhi' genre to express requests. *According to Searl (1969), different speech acts may be governed by different rules or strategies.* These two types of 'tongzhi' employ different strategies in writing practice. But the focus of the discussion will be placed on the 'pingxing tongzhi'.

1.1 The descriptions of 'tongzhi'. In the composition guide books, 'tongzhi' is always an important genre. Every text book gives description as to how to write 'tongzhi'. To sum up, there are two kinds of descriptions:

Description 1: Tongzhi is composed of four parts: the heading, which describes what kind of 'tongzhi' the letter is concerned, the salutation, the body of 'tongzhi', and date. The heading also expresses the main purpose of the 'tongzhi'. The main body of the 'tongzhi' begins with the situation, the reason for issuing the tongzhi, the purpose of tongzhi, such as the items to be notified. (Liang et al, 1992:230).

Description 2: The language of 'tongzhi' has to be straightforward and solemn. It represents the authority's voice. The writer is supposed to notify the reader in a clear way (Chen, 1991: 220).

Description 1 talks about both the formula and rhetorical structure of 'tongzhi'. Description 2 talks about the use of language in 'tongzhi'. Being straightforward is to express the idea directly, not in a roundabout way. Being solemn is to represent the authority's voice. These two descriptions give a general picture about what 'tongzhi' should be like. Take the 'tongzhi' below as an example:

The Document of Ministry of Foreign Trade

Tongzhi of Prohibiting Importing Second-hand Clothes

April 29, 1985.

In recent years, companies in some districts and departments have imported large quantities of second-hand clothes from Hong Kong and other foreign countries regardless of the people's health and the danger of contagious disease. They have made profits out of selling these clothes but have brought about harmful effects to society.

In order to protect the health of our people, and vindicate national prestige, after studying this matter with some of the departments concerned, we have made the following decisions. When this document is received, all the districts and departments must stop immediately importing second-hand clothes through any business channels. If anyone violates this decision, he is to be investigated and punished as a smuggler by customs, and the responsibility of the importing company has to be investigated. As to those who have made an order but have not received delivery of second-hand clothes yet, they should negotiate with the exporters to cancel the order or sell them where they are ordered, and should not ship them to our country. As to those who can neither cancel nor sell the clothes, their delivery has to be suspended and investigated by the customs, and quarantined and sterilised by medical departments, and handed over to commercial managerial departments.

This letter is a very typical 'xiang tongzhi'. The formula, following description 1, has a heading, the body of the letter and date. The heading with the character 'tongzhi' written in it, represents features that distinguish this types of letters from others as 'tongzhi' genre. The heading is about the main point or purpose of this letter, which is 'prohibiting importing second-hand clothes'. It is important in that it tells the reader what the letter is all about. At the same time, it also reveals that the speech act in the letter is an order, because the reader does not have any choice but to follow what the letter says, which is not to import second-hand clothes. In this aspect, the reader is controlled by the writer who is the superior.

In content this 'tongzhi' has four parts:

- 1 the background situation: the selling of second-hand clothes (lines 7-12)
- 2 reason for the decision: in order to protect the people's health and maintain the country's prestige (lines 14-16)
- 3 order: prohibit importing second-hand clothes (lines 17-19)
- 4 methods taken for the order to be carried out: (lines 19-29)

In language, this 'tongzhi' is consistent with description 2 as the language is straightforward and solemn. Since the relationship between the writer and the reader is the superior and subordinate, the language reflects this relationship in that it follows the controlling principle in both speech act verb and lexis. The order is brought about in the first sentence of the second paragraph:

wei baohu renmin jiankang, ... jue ding: cong wenjian
in ord to protect people health decide from document
daoda zhiri qi, ge diqu, ge bumen bixun
arrive GNE date begin every district every unit must
liji tingzhi yi renhe maoyi fangshi jinkou
immediately stop in any business channel import
jiu fuzhuang.
secon-hand clothes

In order to protect the health of our people, ... (we) have made the following decisions. When this document is received, every districts and departments must stop immediately importing second-hand clothes through any business channels.

In this long sentence, there are two speech act verbs. The first is concerned with the making of the order, which is the verb 'juejing' (decide). Those everybody can make a decision, this verb used in 'tongzhi' has a special connotation. It is used in 'tongzhi' as a special verb to indicate the superior's order or decision. 'Juejing' is acting like a symbol word where the reader can find the order immediately. The second speech act verb is related to the order itself: 'bixun liji tingzhi' or 'must immediately stop'. It is

composed of a modal 'bixun' (must), the adjective 'liji' (immediate) and the verb 'tingzhi' (stop). 'Bixun' indicates imperativeness, and modifies a verb. But this modal is usually used by a superior to issue an order or instruction. In this example, the authority of the order is strengthened by the lexicon, the adjective 'liji' (immediate), which indicates that the order is not only imperative, but also urgent. Similar modal verbs are also found the part four, line .

So the employment of modal verbs of imperativeness is a typical characteristics in the language of the 'xiaxing tongzhi'. In order to express the meaning in this type of 'tongzhi' clearly, the method of script is employed (Wierzbicka, 1991). The implication can be expressed in the script below:

If I decide this,
I will say this to you.
You have to do what I say.
I will see to it that you do this.

In this script, the writer has all the control over the reader. The reader does not have any control over the order. All s/he has to do is to take the order and do what the writer requires.

However, many tongzhi related to business communication are not written in such a consistent manner with the two descriptions, because the text books mainly focus on the discussion of 'tongzhi' as 'xiaxing' genre. The 'pingxing' genre is seldom touched upon. The following discussion will focus on the 'pingxing sales tongzhi' genre. Even the 'pingxing sales tongzhi' is a mixture of 'tongzhi' and sales. It can not really be labelled as 'pingxing sales', because of its 'tongzhi' elements. In these letters, traces of 'xiaxing tongzhi' can still be found. But on the whole it represents a 'pingxing' relationship with the reader.

2 The Data. I have selected 30 'pingxing sales tongzhi'. The selection of these letters is based on the following criteria:

First, all of the 30 letters are written in the 'tongzhi' genre and have the character 'tongzhi' in the headings. This rules out the letters which are sales letters.

Second, in order to present a picture about the range of use of 'tongzhi' in sales, I try to include as many kinds of products as possible.

3 Sociolinguistic Variables. As to sociolinguistic variables, there is very little difference in social distance among the 30 letters, because they represent an equal relationship