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英文求职信语体研究

A Genre-based Study of English Job Application Letters

张亚楠 / 著



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Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed rapid development of China benefiting from its reform and opening up. Globalization has increased the need for cross-cultural communication so that people have access to information all over the world. With China's entry into the WTO, the success of the Olympic Games, foreign exchanges will be more frequent.

Under such international environment, more and more foreign enterprises are entering into China and a considerable number of Chinese graduates plan to seek further development in foreign enterprises or joint ventures. English language has become the lingua franca of the world, and one of the most important languages that one needs to learn in order to find an ideal job. Given the necessity and importance of English ability in job hunting, the skills of writing an 'appropriate' English job application letter are needed. As an indispensable part of resumes, if written properly, job application letters can be a useful tool in communicating specifics that are not usually found on one's resume, and can often control whether the resume will get considered or discarded. However, ignorance of the features of an English application letter or a direct translation from a Chinese version may cause misunderstandings between the job hunters and the potential employers. A comprehensive and systemic study on English job application letters need to be conducted.

0.1 Research Background

The conception of 'genre' may be unfamiliar to some people; however, it pervades human lives. When people go about their business, interact with others and try to get along in the world, genres are used to save their time, and meet their expectations. We hear people say 'I have heard an interesting joke today,' 'I have to give a

lecture at eight,’ or ‘Do you have a travel brochure for the Great Wall?’ Genres have the power to help or hurt human interaction, to ease communication or to deceive, to enable someone to speak or to discourage someone from saying something different. People learn how to do small talk to ease the social discomfort of large group gathering and meeting new people. Outraged citizens can express themselves in letters to the editors, but first-year college students may struggle to dissociate their personal experience from their research papers. Genre has great significance for people’s lives.

The job application letter is a commonly used genre in the job market. Studies on job application letters are, however, far from adequate. Among a few papers on job application letters, many of the authors focus merely on one perspective of this genre to discuss either its lexical-grammatical features, or its formal structures. Job application letters, as one of promotional genres (Bhatia), tend to serve communicative purposes which surface-level linguistic descriptions can hardly reveal. Other more important perspectives such as the context of this genre and cognitive generic structure of this genre should be taken into consideration, which can give people an all-round understanding of this genre. Genre study on English job application letters is a focus of this study.

0.2 Research Questions

Based on this background, this thesis attempts to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the contextual features, generic features as well as linguistic features of English job application letters?
- (2) How do English job application letters by native English writers differ from that by Chinese writers?
- (3) What are the underlying causes for the differences?
- (4) What are the pedagogical implications for English teaching in China?

0.3 Purpose and Significance

To answer the above research questions, this thesis conducts a study on English

job application letters from three spaces—the space of context, the space of genre and the space of language, hoping to find out the contextual features, generic features and linguistic features of English job application letters.

Findings of this study would be of significance in three aspects:

(1) Theoretically, it will shed light on the overall features of this genre and be a complementation to genre studies.

(2) Pedagogically, it will give enlightenments to English teaching, broaden students' understanding of this genre and enhance their cultural and cognitive awareness.

(3) Practically, it will provide job applicants with suggestions in writing English job application letters.

0.4 Methodology

To carry out this study, two corpora are established first. Corpus A consists of 30 English job application letters written by native English writers. Corpus B includes 30 letters written by Chinese writers. To make the study objective, authentic and representative:

(1) Application letters are confined to job application letters in this thesis. Other forms like application letters for scholarships are excluded.

(2) 30 letters in corpus A are collected from the book *Best Resumes For Grads*. All these letters are written by Certified Professional Resume Writers from the Professional Association of Resume Writers and Career Coaches^① in the USA. All these letters have been used by job hunters in the job market and are considered to be 'helpful' in gaining a job interview.

(3) 30 letters in corpus B are collected mainly through two channels. 15 English job application letters are collected from the personnel departments in two universities,

① **The Professional Association of Resume Writers & Career Coaches** (PARW/CC) was founded in 1990. Prior to that time, there had been no association for career professionals to exchange information, enhance their skills, or demonstrate their commitment to providing professional services to the general public. Certified Professional Resume Writers (CPRW) are the career industry's leading experts in the development of strategic resumes. Since 1991, CPRWs have demonstrated their knowledge, talent and writing expertise in meeting the industry standard of excellence and in serving the client's career interests.

Henan Institute of Finance and Economics and Henan Polytechnic University. The other 15 letters are collected from the internet.

(4) To ensure the representativeness of the two corpora, more than 30 occupations are involved in them which include teaching, public relations, architecture, pharmacist, financial investment, hospitality, engineering and so on.

According to Wen Qiufang, the methodology adopted by this study is a mixed one which involves both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

(1) Statistical analyses that are quantitative in nature are conducted at the lexical-grammatical level as well as at the textual level. At the lexical-grammatical level, statistic analyses on the words, sentences and texts will be carried out with the help of software Oxford WordSmith Tools 4.0 and Text Analyzer^① to discover the surface-level linguistic features of the English job application letters. At the generic level, frequencies of the occurrence of moves and steps will be examined to disclose the deep-level cognitive structures of English job application letters written by native writers and by Chinese.

(2) Descriptive analyses that are qualitative in nature are made when analyzing the contextual features of English job application letters to find out the deep-level features of English job application letters.

(3) Contrastive analyses involving both quantitative and qualitative analyses are carried out to summarize similarities and differences between English job application letters in two corpora.

0.5 Organization of the Book

This book consists of seven parts.

The first part is a general introduction to the whole study. In this part, the background, purpose and significance of this study are discussed first. Then, research questions are put forward. The methodology of this study is explained. The organization of this thesis is introduced at the end.

In Chapter One, studies on genre and studies on job application letters are reviewed respectively. Definitions of genre carried out by different schools and in various

① **Text Analyzer** is software on the website usingenglish.com. It is used for text analyses and statistics.

fields are reviewed first. Studies on job application letters abroad and in China are reviewed critically with evaluating comments on them.

Chapter Two puts forward a theoretical framework of this study based on the critical review in Chapter Two. In this chapter, a three-space framework involving lexical-grammatical analysis, cognitive generic structure analysis and contextual analysis are established to make a comprehensive and systemic discussion about this genre. English job application letters are studied as a text, a genre and a social practice through this framework.

In Chapter Three, the three-space analyses of English job application letters are made according to the framework set up in Chapter Three. Analyses are conducted in different spaces. In the contextual space, emphasis is given to the cultural context and situational context of this genre. In the textual space, move-step analysis is made to find the cognitive structures of this genre. In the linguistic space, analyses about words, sentences etc. are carried out with the help of software.

In Chapter Four, a contrastive study on English job application letters written by native writers and by Chinese at the generic level and the linguistic level are made. Statistics of the two corpora are compared and discussed. Similarities and differences are summarized. Possible causal factors of the differences are elaborated.

In Chapter Five, pedagogical implications are discussed, which includes the specific teaching stages in class, the way to integrate cultural knowledge into English teaching and the diverse roles that teachers play.

The last part serves as the conclusion of the whole book. The limitations of the study as well as suggestions for future research are also presented.

Chapter 1 Literature Review

‘Genre’, a borrowed word from French, means ‘category’ or ‘type’. The study of genre has experienced a long history ever from the time of Aristotle. Previously, it was mainly used in literature study. Now, it has drawn from various disciplines such as folkshore studies, ethnography, sociology, conversational analysis etc. during the process of which many scholars have defined it and discussed about it. Genre is viewed by Freedman & Medway (1994) as follows:

Genre has been viewed as: (a) primarily literary, (b) entirely defined by textual regularities in form and content, (c) fixed and immutable, and (d) classifiable into neat and mutually exclusive categories and subcategories.

Elliott and McGregor (1989) summarize five different definitions of genre:

(1) Folk definitions: genres are seen as types or classes of texts or discourses that are recognized as significant by members of a given culture.

(2) Structural definitions: genres are defined in terms of the broad structural characteristics displayed by the targeted texts; for instance, narratives might be defined as those texts which satisfy the structural definition: Orientation/Complication/Resolution.

(3) Social definitions: genres are defined in terms of the function or the use of the particular targeted text or set of texts in the context of their occurrence; thus, genre is a staged, goal-oriented, social process.

(4) Linguistic definitions: genres are defined in terms of shared linguistic properties of texts (i. e. the patterns of linguistic choices that are made within the representative texts) .

(5) Generic motifs: definitions of genres allude to prominent motifs within the targeted texts. These may be special lexemes or phrases, and so on, which mark the text; for instance, ‘once upon a time’ might be suggested as a motif, which indexes the text

as a fable, or a fairy story. This chapter is a review of literature on the definitions of genre and related studies on job application letters.

1. 1 Definitions of Genre

It is no easy job to summarize them all. Review of the definitions of it in this thesis will be conducted within three main schools in applied linguistics—the school of systemic–functional linguistics (Halliday, Hasan and Martin), the school of ESP (Swales, Bhatia) and the school of new rhetoric (Miller) .

1. 1. 1 Systemic–Functional Perspective

As a representative of functional linguistics, (Martin 250) defines genre as ‘*how things get done; when language is used to accomplish them. They range from literary to far from literary forms: poems, narratives, expositions, lectures, seminars, recipes, manuals, appointment–making, service encounters, news broadcasts and so on. The term genre is used here to embrace each of linguistically realized activity types which comprise so much of our culture*’ . Later Martin, Christie et al. define genre as ‘*represents at an abstract level the verbal strategies used to accomplish social purposes of many kinds. These strategies can be thought of as stages through which one moves in order to realize a genre...* Schematic structure represents the positive contribution genre makes to a text: a way of getting from A to B in the way a given culture accomplishes whatever the genre in question is functioning to do in that culture; and in the contextual model assumed here genre is interpreted as a staged, goal-oriented, social process’ (Martin 33) . In 1997, Martin re-defines genre as ‘the system of staged, goal-oriented, social process through which social subjects in a given culture live their lives’ (Martin 13) .

1. 1. 2 ESP Perspective

Swales, a practitioner and pioneer of ESP, defines genre as:

A class of communicative events, the member of which share some set of communi-

cative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the scope of a genre as here conceived narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action. In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience. If all high probability expectations are realized, the exemplar will be viewed as prototypical by the parent discourse community. The genre names inherited and produced by discourse communities and imported by others constitute valuable ethnographic communication, but typically need further validation (Swales 58) .

As one of Swales' students, ESP learner Bhatia defines genre as:

A recognized communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose (s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value. These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognized purpose (s) (Bhatia 13) .

In his recent book *Words of Written Discourse*, Bhatia summarizes the common ground of different schools of genre analysis as following:

(1) Genres are recognizable communicative events, characterized by a set of communicative purposes identified and mutually understood by members of the professional or academic community in which they regularly occur.

(2) Genres are highly structured and conventionalized constructs, which constraints on allowable contributions not only in terms of the intentions one would like to give expression to and the shape they often take, but also in terms of the lexico-grammatical resources one can employ to give discoursal values to such formal features.

(3) Established members of a particular professional community will have a much greater knowledge and understanding of the use and exploitation of genres than those who

are apprentices, new members or outsiders.

(4) Although genres are viewed as conventionalized constructs, expert members of the disciplinary and professional communities often exploit generic resources to express not only ‘private’ but also organizational intentions within the constructs of ‘socially recognized communicative purposes’.

(5) Genres are reflections of disciplinary and organizational cultures and in that sense, they focus on social actions embedded within disciplinary, professional and other institutional practices.

(6) All disciplinary and professional genres have integrity of their own, which is often identified with reference to a combination of textual, discursive and contextual factors (Bhatia 23).

1. 1. 3 New Rhetoric Perspective

A great deal of the American interest in genres is derived from the ‘New Rhetoric’ (the work of Burke 1966; Searle, 1976, and Austin, 1962 on speech acts), which shifts attention from structure and content of an essay to the contextual framework of society. These ideas have inspired Carolyn Miller in her influential article ‘Genre as Social Action’. She defines genre as ‘a conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of rhetorical action; as action it acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which the situation arose’ (Miller 63).

Miller’s approach is centered on repetitive rhetorical situations, but she rejects the notion of genre as a recurrent pattern of forms used for simple classifications, which easily leads to reductionism and formalism. She believes that genre is ①Comprised of category of discourse resulting from the social action. ②Rule-governed to some degree. ③Distinguishable from form. ④Constitutive of culture. ⑤A mediating force between the individual and the society.

1. 2 Previous Studies on Job Application Letters

Previous studies on job application letters abroad and in China are reviewed respectively in the following paragraphs. Critical comments are given on their studies. The

methodologies and results of these studies will be enlightening to the study in this thesis.

1. 2. 1 Related Studies Abroad

Studies of application letters abroad are mainly carried out by ESP scholars and applied linguists. A move-step analysis proposed by ESP scholars is a useful methodology, because moves are semantic/functional units of texts which can be identified first because of their communicative purposes, and second because of linguistic boundaries typical of the moves.

Genre, in the definition of Swales, one of the representatives of ESP scholars, is 'a class of communicative events which share some set of communicative purpose' (Swales 58). According to Swales, genre has certain characteristics: the beginning, middle and the end. Job application letters conform to the traditional definitions of genre in that they have a well-defined communicative purpose.

So far, three groups of scholars have carried out the study on job application letters abroad. They are Bhatia (1989, 1993), Henry and Roseberry (2001) and Ulla Connor, Kristen Precht, and Thomas Upton (2002). The move-step model proposed by ESP school was adopted by them all though the definition and clarification of moves are different. The purposes of their study are different in that Henry and Roseberry's main concern is job application letters generated by native writers while Bhatia and Ulla Connor et al. focus on the cross-cultural variations in job application letters.

1. 2. 1. 1 Bhatia's Study

Bhatia, one of his students, has a complete discussion of applications letters. According to Bhatia, the main function of the job application letter is to highlight and make relevant the qualifications and experience of the applicant to the specifications of the job.

In 1989, Bhatia reports on the nativization of job applications from south Asia with a corpus of some 200 letters of application for jobs and scholarships from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The major concern of his study is the cross-cultural variations of job applications letters from different cultural backgrounds. He reports that in South Asia the function of a job application letter appears to be different from what it is in the West. The main function of a western application letter is to highlight and make

relevant the qualification and experience of the applicant to the specifications of the job. In job application letters from South Asia, most applicants were found to be using the cover letter just to enclose the C. V. , without taking advantage of the opportunity to offer self-appraisal to convince the reader of the strength of their candidature.

Later on, he (Bhatia 59) compared job application letters with sales promotional letters and concluded that ‘a job application letter is closely related to a sales promotion letter because both of them are persuasive in nature and both of them share the same communicative purpose (i. e. , to promote a particular product or service) , use the same medium and exploit the same form’ . So like the sales promotional letters, job application letters can also be analyzed with a move-step method and a seven-part structural description can be assigned: establishing credentials, introducing candidature, offering incentives, enclosing documents, using pressure tactics, soliciting response and ending politely.

Bhatia further points out that moves of a genre are not necessarily of the same importance. Some moves are more essential than others, and there is a certain degree of flexibility in the number of moves as well as in the sequencing of these moves. His result can be shown in the following table.

Table 1-1 Generic Structure of Job Application Letters by Bhatia

Move	Content	Flexibility
1	establishing credentials	Obligatory
2	introducing candidature	Obligatory
(a)	<i>offering the candidature</i>	
(b)	<i>essential detailing of the candidature</i>	
(c)	<i>indicating value of the candidature</i>	
3	offering incentives	Optional
4	enclosing documents	Optional
5	using pressure tactics	Obligatory
6	soliciting response	Optional
7	ending politely	Optional