FORMS OF SUBSTITUTION IN BUSINESS ENGLISH*

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1. Introduction

It may be said that the ordinary run of business communications covers a somewhat limited area of human activities. In such communications, occasions for dealing with philosophical discussions or abstract concepts are not as likely to arise as in literary works or in journalistic situations.

In describing activities of such a range, business communicants are often bound to repeat what has been previously stated in a letter. Any communicant tending toward stylistic considerations, however, will feel most reluctant to slight this customary advice:

Avoid the inadvertent repetition of words or sounds in a sentence or contiguous sentences, as it jars the reader.

This point of style causes the business writer to resort to varied forms of substitution. Indeed, pronouns may stand high on the list of these forms; and yet, in some contexts, pronoun substitution can not very well serve its purpose, because it sometimes causes confusion on the part of the reader concerning what these pronouns refer to.

When readers are most likely to be so confused, business communicants will find themselves wondering what other devices of substitution Business English has to offer them.

In the pages that follow, I shall take up several such devices and suggest the line along which business correspondents should deal with them.

It may not be out of place here to clarify my attitude to the study of this aspect of Business English. I have tried to be descriptive in the investigation I made of the common run of business communications. I have tried even harder, however, to view this problem in the eyes of a beginner in business writing; for this reason, occasional comments of a prescriptive nature will be added where they seem due.

2. An outline of substitution

Referring to what the reader already knows, a substituting word or phrase supplies old information and reconciles it with something new; to the latter, of course, the writer intends to draw the reader’s attention.

Such general mention of the function of substitution leads to the following specific qualities inherent in this device: the substitution is the method for

1) avoiding repetition,

Experts and scholars in rhetoric agree that in prose the repetition of sounds or words can be obtrusive and conspicuous; and that euphony cries out in pain for revision unless some effect is intended*. The words that carry old information, as we have seen, do not deserve much attention and, therefore, should not distract the reader; hence, recommendation of the employment of substitution devices.

2) abbreviation &

The writer, in the words of W.R. & D.R.
Ebbitt*, should give the point he wants to emphasize the space and development its significance calls for. In passing on old information to another sentence, he can not afford to give as much space to it as he does to new information.

3) providing smooth transition.

When one sentence ends and another starts, a gap usually appears. The writer could help the reader to fill this gap, in part, by transferring information from sentence to sentence in order to provide transitional guidance.

3. The analysis of substitution forms

1) "This/These + noun"***

A glance through any batch of business letters will convince a student of business letter writing that this type of substitution outnumbers the others. I might say that it is, what linguists call, an "unmarked" form**.

Part of the reason of such popularity may be this: that business communicants are advised to take up the only one subject-matter in a message; otherwise, confusion, resulting from a possible blurred focus of the letter, would be very likely to arise on the part of the reader. For this reason, what is dealt with in the letter is looked upon as "the" topic by the sender and the recipient alike. The demonstrative, indicating the implication of greater nearness and familiarity than the other demonstratives, goes along well with this aspect of business writing.

(1) "This/These"

"Prices would normally be the same as before, but in your case we are prepared to grant a special 2% discount. This* is in addition to the present 2 1\%/2 % allowed for payment within 30 days."

The writer might have added "discount" to "this" and ended up with ungainly repetition: two "discount"'s then would be only one word away. Moreover, 'the law of proximity' ensures that no other words than "discount" can possibly be absent here.

I have to say, however, that this case is an exception, not the rule. The business writer is advised to follow "this/these" with an adequate noun for the sake of added clarity**.

(2) "This/These + noun"

I might safely conclude from what I mentioned on the functions of substitution that what follows "this/these" or their cousins need not be as specific a word as what is replaced. General words are, in a sense, specific enough**. Given below in an arbitrary order are a few instances that go to show how words of such a non-specific nature show themselves.

"Every two or three months, we have large orders of heavy restaurant equipment such as stoves and ovens shipped from England to Capetown. Once this equipment arrives, we then arrange for its delivery to our customers, usually major restaurants throughout South Africa." (this + the central word of what is replaced)

"Thank you for your inquiry of 12th April. We are ready to supply our 'Rainbow Drops' at the special price of 2s. per lb., delivered by van to any address in London. This confectionery possesses the special qualities you require...." (this + the category a substituted term comes under)

"It is possible, however, that local conditions may not favour the establishment of heavy dealing in fish. With this possibility in mind, you will understand that we cannot do more than place a small trial order to test the market." (this + an abstract word to which the preceding sentence is condensed)

"At present we hold large stocks, and pay for them every month as we sell them. We would like to continue this arrangement." (this + what may be named "summary word": in this example, there is nothing that may bring the word, "arrangement," to the mind of the writer, as contrasted to the previous example. The appellation, "summary word," clarifies the function of this diction.)

"We're sorry that the radio you purchased from us was unsatisfactory. You have every right to expect merchandise from this store to
be in perfect condition, and we appreciate your telling us of this experience.

"Our shipping department makes every effort to see that every piece of merchandise is thoroughly inspected before it is sent out." (this + a tactful summary word: "this experience" is used euphemistically and does not indicate too clearly what the reader went through — the writer can not afford to make the tone of the message more negative than is necessary.)

In the letter below, "small," a more familiar word in the positive degree substitutes "the narrowest." This example suggests how the details of a word are pared and pruned when another word is used in its stead later on.

"Your failure to pay causes us particular inconvenience, as the prices of the goods were cut so low as to leave only the narrowest margin of profit. The delay in payment threatens to turn this small profit into a loss."

The examples that follow raise suggestive points of style and usage:

"As you undertook to deliver free of charge goods over at £10 in value, we admit that you were strictly within your rights is charging us for the cost of carriage, but as these two orders could for all practical purposes be regarded as one, we felt that this strict insistence on your rights was unjustifiable."

The information contained in the underscored portion comes down to these sentences: that the charging was a strict insistence on your rights, and that this insistence was unjustifiable. In other words, the variation in question introduces the writer's point of view on the act of charging. The substitution, therefore, carries new information — in an accusing tone at that —, which is out of harmony with the function of variation devices*. I should say, therefore, that an excessive use of this sentence structure can hardly be justified.

It will merit special mention that "this/these + noun" does not invariably function as a device designed for substitution. "This journal" in the following message, for instance, does not work in the place of any preceding words; they are taken only to mean "the journal we are offering to you."

"We think you will agree that in these times of keen competition special efforts are needed both to build up and maintain satisfactory sales.

"Many manufacturers have informed us that this journal has been of great assistance to them in promoting their sales."

Such ample use that business communicants make of "this/these + noun" leads to this ironic fact: that though the combination is primarily employed to avoid the repetition of words, the jingle of the demonstrative pronouns is not very unusual in business letters. Due caution, therefore, should be exercised in handling this form of replacement—"Do not be shy of the device, but use it with discretion." is a suggested signpost for business writers.

2) "That/Those + noun""10

In several thousand business messages I went through for this short article, "that/those + noun" did not appear as frequently as "this/these + noun." If I am justified in naming the latter pattern an "unmarked" device of substitution, the form under this heading may come on top of the list of "marked" forms.

Among several rules put forward by linguists to explain this marked quality of the pattern, is included what Prof. Hashiba discusses: he states that it is an emphatic expression"11. Indeed, being a semantic definition, this account may not be clear enough to be a guiding principle for those who draft letters; still, I think I can break down this general principle to a set of rules practical enough to assist writers in their tasks.

(1) This device is used when "this/these + noun" breeds confusion on the part of the reader.

"You have been so prompt in your payment of bills that we are sure you overlooked your January account. The amount of that month's purchases come (sic) to $225.00." (The writer might have written "this month," and then have left the reader puzzled over whether it meant
"January," or "the month in which he received the message.")

"The smoke nuisance about which you have written to us comes under the jurisdiction of the Smoke Control Bureau of the Building Department.

"We are taking the liberty of forwarding your letter to Mr. George S Laird of that office." ("That office" succeeded in avoiding the confusion that might have resulted, had "this office" been used instead — the reader would have had good reason to wonder if Mr. Laird was in the office the letter was delivered to, after all.)

(2) The phrase finds its place in a message where the writer tries to make a strong emotional plea or sales talk.

"We note with regret that the goods ordered on 1st August were not delivered until this morning, in spite of the fact that an early delivery was guaranteed and the order obtained on the strength of that guarantee."

"Do you want your customers to experience really first-class radio listening in their cars?

"Our 'Radioceptor' was built for just that! It is designed by craftsmen who have been making car radios for twenty years...."

(3) It works in harmony with an informal or a familiar speech level. Which often brings the device into play in the field of sales letters.

"Could it be that you've given up smoking? We really cannot believe it. Was your last box of cigars not up to par? We certainly hesitate to believe that. Have you moved out of town? Surely not! Then please do let us know why we have not had the pleasure of serving you for three whole months?"

3) "The + noun"

The unique features of this "marked" pattern of substitution may be summed up as follows:

(1) With the help of a past participle, a relative clause or some qualifying phrases, this device can refer to what is stated in the letters leading up to the present communication. This item, therefore, enables the writer to substitute what may have been elaborated on in the preceding messages. Needless to say, the marked form of substitution does not fulfill this function.

"Of course we understand that the unfortunate event you describe in your letter is an exception, and are willing to grant you the extention asked for."

This method comes in useful in exchanging credit inquiries where it is essential to mask the identity of the firm under investigation.

"We regret to say, in response to your letter of May 28, that our experience with the firm in question has not been satisfactory."

(2) This form comes in to paraphrase the entity well known to the public: "the + the information the public share on a substituted term" is the tried and true formula.

"Mr. Mark A. Paul, Managing Director of Morgan & Cie International, and I are planning a small dinner party in honor of John D. de Butts, Chairman of the Board, and John J. Scanlon, Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company...."

"We hope that you will be able to join us in this opportunity to meet the senior management of the world's largest corporation."

4) "Elegant variation"

A study of repetition in English employed in the conduct of business will convince most transmitters that there is a definite enough demarkation line between a careless and an advertent repetition.

Some, however, carry this avoidance of repetition to extremes and declare against using the same word in a sentence or within some other near limit. This contributes, in part, to the employment of elegant variation, the ironic name given in 'Modern English Usage.'

These confirmed variationists have been under an all-out attack. Some label them as second-rate writers; others criticize them as setting readers wondering in vain if some differ-
ence in meaning is intended between synonyms used.

But in the face of those pointing their fingers at it, elegant variation dies hard in Business English. Scores of such illustrations may be produced. Let three suffice.

"It isn't often nowadays that one takes the time to write to congratulate a friend for 'saying a few words.' Your talk at the Sales Conference, however, was so outstanding that I feel compelled to put pen to paper." (write = put pen to paper)

"This is just a note to tell how very much the Company appreciated the outstanding effort which your whole department put into getting the Baxter order out on time.

"Without everyone's wholehearted effort it could not have been done and I want you to convey my sincere thanks to every one of your staff. It was a splendid effort." (outstanding = wholehearted = splendid)

"Our inability to settle our account is due to the difficulty of marketing the goods bought from you, a direct result of the high figures at which you priced them and the poor condition in which they arrived. It is not our wish to emphasize the justification for our failure to pay..." (inability = failure; settle our account = pay)

A plausible reason for this phenomenon is that the repetition of sounds, not to mention that of words, may jar on the ears of native speakers of English more unpleasantly than on those on this side of the Pacific. I doubt, for instance, whether many Japanese businessmen at the threshold of commercial English may tell which of these words euphony falls for, "vividity," or "vividness."*15

The occasional use of elegant variation in business communications, therefore, is not entirely without reason. Such being the case, I will not go all out to join Fowler and his followers in laying all the blame at its door.*14 I would rather suggest that transmitters exercise their tact and discretion in putting this method of replacement to good use.

I may now turn to the question whether some general advice can be given to fortify the writer against objectionable application of elegant variation. Some distinguished men have tried their hands at this; however, I think that it would be profitable to reconsider their suggestions within the framework of Business English, since those scholars are not largely concerned with this branch of English.

To my mind, these are the points to which business writers should pay added heed:

1. Try and give a chance to other forms of substitution, especially "this/these + noun," and make a sparing use of elegant variation.

2. Do not use a polysyllable synonym in the place of a short word only to make the word sound grandiose; a violation which has a wide following among those who still believe that business letters are clusters upon clusters of business jargon.

3. Do not confuse synonyms that have important differences in meaning in English for business. "Allowance" and "discount" are miles apart in this branch of English, but they are treated as the words with the same meaning in the next excerpt:

"As allowance has already been made for large orders and as further price-cutting would result in heavy losses, we must reluctantly refuse to consider any further discounts."

5. "Such (+ article) + noun"

A few linguists have outlined some selection features of this lexical item, maintaining to the effect that it is used freely on a formal speech level*17. I am almost certain that this feature works for Japanese correspondents because writings of a formal style come to them much more easily than those of a familiar tone.

I shall see below what else business communicants ought to have in mind in handling the adjective in question.

1. "Such (+ article) + adjective + noun"

This type of substitution finds the right niche for itself in an emotional context. But, except for good-will letters, where an expres-
sion or two of friendly feelings will not hurt"18, few such emotive expressions are seen in the better sort of business messages; accordingly, sensible writers will rightly steer clear of this expression.

(2) "Such (+ article) + noun"

Business writers are well advised to handle this formula with care, as, besides the function of replacement, it generalizes what it substitutes. Such generalization is not always a virtue in communication: it is likely to give rise to obscurity in meaning — especially so when used in a request or a question. The underlined portion below is obscure enough to puzzle a beginner in business over what information should be added to the terms and conditions of the order named19:

"Our associated company in Paris require 200 of the type 06 Ashtrays mentioned above (Catalogue No. 2369).

"Please let me know your terms for such an order, f.o.b. Calais, including discount terms, and your delivery dates."

This quality of the noun modifier is, of course, useful in its place: especially when the writer is obliged to show disapproval of what he is replacing, this pattern is there to aid him.

In the passage quoted below, the transmitter has succeeded in implying that the step is out of the question by means of this substitution and an intensifier, "of course.": the former suggesting "this step and even its likes."

"The profits are in no sense excessive, with the result that price reductions could be made only by a sacrifice of quality. Such a step is of course unthinkable if we are to continue producing a sound car appealing to owners of discernment."

By the same token, this form of substitution assists the writer of the next message in his effort to make a diplomatic show of how committed he is to rectifying his mistake—"such a mistake" denotes "the trouble in question," and "similar irregularities" at once.

"We apologise sincerely for the trouble caused to you, and will take all possible steps to ensure that such a mistake is not made again."

6) "So"

A plenty of instances of the adverb find their way into business letters in the form of "do so." S.G. Vines and G.B. Sansom pointed out, nearly three score years ago, that "do so" strikes a formal tone as opposed to "do it," which is preferred in a familiar style20. In business communications, correspondents are often advised to keep to the slightly formal or restrained style of writing, and so it will be worth their while to make a closer study of "do so."

D. Bolinger added a noteworthy restraint on the use of this phrase, indicating that it is "somber" while "do it" suggests neutrality21.

The examples of this phrase that came my way during investigation tell me (l) that in a number of instances, there is nothing dismal about what it refers to; but (2) that these words, indeed, tend to be employed in letters of a somber nature as a whole. This may be attested by the fact that more than half of my examples of the phrase are found in letters of refusal.

What I have discussed on this form of substitution may be documented by the next example. Note that the first two paragraphs of the example display a fairly bright tone, which will function as a baffler against the ill news that is about to break.

"There is nothing I would enjoy more than to join the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and I thank you sincerely for your kind invitation.

"When I join an organization I like to do so in the knowledge that I will be able to devote to it a fair portion of my time and make a worthwhile contribution.

"In this instance, however, I am not in this position, because the demands on my time are increasing apace and feel I cannot in all fairness add to my outside commitments."
4. Conclusion

Recently scholars of English have been making advances in the field of substitution, turning out several publications on the subject. They have succeeded in clarifying some of the selectional restraints seen in various substitution devices.

Business communicants who consider the quality of their English might turn to these achievements, hoping to find some descriptions that will improve their writing. But they will probably not find what they are looking for: in the eyes of a businessman, these books are chiefly concerned with what sentences he should not write, not the other way around.

Indeed, a knowledge of English linguistics may equip business writers with information of some importance. But their job does not stop there; rather, they have to pick up where linguists leave off. If they are to draft effective business messages, correspondents have to run their eyes through stack upon stack of business message till they can recognize a good sentence when they see one. They have to commit effective letters to memory when such letters come to their attention. When they have occasions to put pen to paper, they have to rack their brains for the messages most suitable to their purposes. And yet, a good many school-leavers who are about to take up their first job will feel that these efforts are frustratingly slow in paying off.

I venture to add this short article to my predecessors’ works in the hope of making "substitution" clearer from the viewpoint of such a beginner in business writing. The uniqueness of my paper, if any, will be seen in this regard.

Last but not least, I have taken up several rules which I judge to be reasonable ones to follow; in principle, however, I must caution against senile submission to these rules. Beginners in business communications should steer their course between the Scylla of "general principles” and the Charybdis of "situations” along the channel of "effective messages.” "Practice makes perfect,” though a worn-out cliche, is the only reliable compass during their voyage.

NOTES:

* A shorter version of this paper was read under the title "A Few Notes on Substitution in Business English” at the 46th annual meeting of The Japan Business English Association at Osaka University of Foreign Studies, on October 18, 1986.
* 1. My research shows that those who write letters of recommendation often make a rhetorical use of repetition. These correspondents repeat the name of the business associate, the former employee, or the friend they intend to recommend without resorting to pronouns. An intended effect is that the name may be known in close association with his qualities of character and personal integrity.

"I am happy indeed to recommend Mr. George Farley for the position in your bookkeeping section.

"Mr. Farley was with our company for three years — from February 1956 to March 1959 — and during that time we found no cause to complain of him whatsoever. Punctual, neat and accurate in his work, a stickler for detail, methodical, Mr. Farley is indeed the ideal man for a book-keeping job.

"We certainly would not hesitate to re-employ Mr. Farley and can therefore recommend him to you unreservedly.”


* 3. The items taken up in this article are arranged, roughly, in an order of importance.

* 4. I do not mean to suggest in any way that business communicants use this form of variation on all occasions. Only, this device should suggest itself first in the minds of businessmen when they wonder what to write by way of substitution. We should note that this form has
its limitations, as shown by the example below:

"How will Christmas morning be in your home? A festive table? The shimmer of tinsel and lights? Ribbon, tissues, and papers scattered beneath the tree?

"Now think of a small child, alone and hungry in a cold and barren room, knowing that this morning — Christmas morning — will be like all the others. Joyless, toyless, friendless."

The correspondent ended up removing the ambiguity that could have been caused by "this morning" by adding what he had in mind — "Christmas morning." Otherwise the recipient might have interpreted it as "the morning of the day."

* 5. The underlines scored in the examples quoted are mine.


* 7. In view of the balance of sentences, the following pair will present an interesting point to note:

This is the most favourable offer,……(a)

This offer is the most favourable,……(b)

The sentences of the former sentence structure turned up in the course of my study all right, but those of the latter structure did not—not as far as I know. The sentence pattern (a) can likely be counted among exceptions to this rule. A stylistic reason for this, I suppose, is:

As compared with adjectives, nouns fit in better with the end of a sentence—commonly known as a prominent position.

The following quotation goes to attest this claim:

"Please remember me to the others and if you decide to make this a regular event, for goodness sake don't have it in the spring, for I'd love to join you next time." (Cf. "make this event regular")

* 8. This rule is not without exception. In a letter, the writer started off by acknowledging receipt of "the letter", concluding his message by adding words of thanks to the "inquiry" sent in.

* 9. In a good many cases, such information amounts to nothing significant: the adjective so inserted fits in with the tone of the letter, and is not likely to strike the reader as too unpredictable. But then again, brevity, one of the qualities preferred in any writing, demands that the writer omit such an adjective.

* 10. In the English business letters I went over, adjectives hardly ever come between "that/those" and "noun," as contrasted to "this/these + noun."


* 12. Not a single instance of 'this' in italics is seen in the letters in my file. Which goes to show emotive quality in "that/those + noun."

* 13. This method of substitution appears to be employed far more repeatedly in Media English than in Business English.

* 14. When parallelism is there to comfort her, for instance, Euphony has nothing to say against repetition.

"Throw this letter away—and you are throwing business away."

* 15. "In sound, there can be no question between vividness with its fourfold repetition of the same vowel sound, its two dentals to add to the ugliness of its two v's, and the comparatively inoffensive vividness. " (Fowler, H.W. & Fowler, F.G., The King's English, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.56, 3rd ed., 1931.)


* 18. The device employed in the next quotation adds to the positive tone of the message:

"I have just learned that you have been promoted to producer of the B.B.C. Italian Programme and I am wasting not one moment in sending you my most sincere congratulations."

"Such an important promotion is certainly a
splendid recognition of your ability and gives you ample opportunity to spread your wings.”

* 19. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defined “such” in a context of this kind as “of the kind or degree already described or implied in context.”


REFERENCES:


