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On Non-Arbitrariness and Constructiveness of Nominalization in Business Discourse

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I. Introduction

Nominalization is a common linguistic phenomenon in English, and it is the way to achieve grammatical metaphor. Nominalization is the use of nouns to embody 'processes' or 'features' that would have in verbs or adjectives (Halliday, 1994). Different schools of linguistics have given degrees of attention to nominalization (Fan Wenfang et al., 2003; Liu Guohui et al., 2004; Zhu Yongsheng, 2006). Such three linguistic schools as Analytic Syntax, Transformative Generative Grammar, and Systemic Functional Grammar have conducted systematic research on nominalizations. According to Transformative Generative Grammar, nominalization is a structure produced by a series of mental operations, reflects the characteristics of the deep structure, and makes a classification of nominalization. But Chomsky thinks that nominalization cannot be viewed as a set of fixed rules, and claims that nominalization should only be interpreted lexically (Bauer, 1983: 75-81). Cognitive linguistics holds that nominalization is a process of highlighting concepts, and it is a matter of turning dynamic actions into static ones. Systemic functional grammar studies nouns in grammatical metaphors and treats nominalization as a common approach to conversion from a congruent form to a non-congruent one. "It is through a noun to reflect the process of an event or characteristics of things that would have been embodied by verbs or adjectives." (Halliday, 1994: 352). The grammatical metaphor raises the research of nominalization to the discourse level, but the discussion of nominalization in systemic functional grammar is still within the linguistic system. It fails to study the nominalization from the actual linguistic environment and thus cannot reveal the nature of the nominalization phenomenon.

II. Generation Mechanism of Nominalization

According to the viewpoint of systemic functional linguistics, language is a social semiotic system composed of the semantic lever, lexico-grammatical lever, and phonological lever. There is a "realization" relationship between the various levels, that is, the lexico-grammar realizes semantic levers, and speech lexico-grammar. Systemic functional linguistics believes that form is the embodiment of meaning, but there is no one-to-one relationship between form and meaning, that is, many different lexico-grammatical forms can realize the same meaning. The following table shows the contrast of meaning and realization relationship between the congruent and metaphorical one in the transitivity system:

Meaning	Realization	
	Congruent Form	Metaphorical Form
Process	Verbal Phrases	Noun Phrases
Participants	Noun Phrases	Verbal Phrases
Environment	Adverbs Phrases, Prepositional Phrases	Noun Phrases, Adjective Phrases
Features	Adjective Phrases	Noun Phrases
Relationship	Conjunctions	Nouns Phrases, Verb Phrases, Prepositional Phrases

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components by prepositional phrases, and the logical relationships by conjunctions. However, there are tensions between different levels of language. Nominalization can release pressure on semantic potential and is the primary means of conversion to non-congruent form. Halliday divided the semantics into three levels, namely "sequence," "figure" and "components." Figures are semantic expressions of events, and figures that represent several events constitute a sequence, which is represented by clause groups. The rank theory allows for a downward "rank shift." In a noun structure, we use nouns and noun phrases to replace a clause or clause complex in the congruent form. Therefore, "rank shift" is an important content of nominalization. E.g.:

(1a) The driver drove the bus too fast down the hill, so the brakes failed.
(1b) The driver's over-rapid downhill driving of the bus caused brake failure.

The (1a) sentence is a congruent form and (1b) shifts the two clauses of (1a) down to two noun phrase structures by nominalization. After "degradation" occurs, the units at the level of clauses are shifted downwards to the units at the level of words, causing the reclassification of the word classes. Grammatical metaphors can almost transform other semantic functions into entities, i.e., the materialization of meaning. Halliday has made the following illustrations of the path of various semantics into entities:

Relater → circumstance → process → quality → entity

Halliday also pointed out that the process of shifting the above types of semantics to nominalization is a process from left to right, which is also a downward shift process.

III. Types of Nominalization

a) The Nominalization of the Process

The metaphor process involves a downward shift of rank, that is, a phrase in the metaphorical expression realizes the "meaning" of a noun that is implemented by a clause in a congruent form. This rank shift involves the transfer of functions and parts of speech. We nominalize the processes into things, and the participants into noun modifiers. For example:

(2a) We won't formally extend the time.
(2b) Formal extensions of the time are not possible.

We use the noun "extension" to replace the verb "extend" that implements the material process and the participant "the time" becomes the post-modifier. Similarly, we nominalize verbs that implement mental processes, existential processes, etc. and these processes become the head of a noun structure. For example:

(3) Jane saw the stars. (Psychological Process)

We can change the above sentence into a noun phrase "Jane's sight of the stars".

(4) There exists a sharp difference between the two sides. (Existential Process)

Similarly sentence (4) becomes a noun phrase "the existence of a sharp difference between the two sides".

b) Nominalization of Characteristics and Properties

In the congruent forms, we represent the characteristics of things with adjectives, and in non-congruent form, we use nouns to embody them. That is, the speaker considers the characteristics as things, such as (5b), (6b):

(5a) She was not hungry to be free.
(5b) She was not born with hunger to be free.
(6a) They were narrow-minded, and I don't like it.
(6b) I don't like their narrow-mindedness.

From the above pairs of sentences, the nominalization of these things will change from a feature to an environment component, such as "hunger" in (5b), or directly into a participant, such as the "narrow-mindedness" in (6b), and the carriers of some features become the modifiers of the participants, such as "they" in (6a) becoming "their" in (6b), thereby weakening the importance of carrier in the information structure of clauses.

c) Nominalization of Relational Components

The relational component refers to the component that interprets the "logical-semantic relationship between two processes" (Halliday, 2007: 73). We display semantic columns composed of two semantic entities with certain logical relations in compound sentences in a congruent expression. In the process of metaphors, the relational components are most likely to shift from the congruent to metaphorical form. We materialize conjunctions with prepositions, verbs, adjectives, and nouns. E.g.:

(7a) He was absent from the meeting because his wife was ill.
(7b) The cause of his absence from the meeting was the illness of his wife.

The noun phrase "the cause of" in (7b) is to show the meaning of the conjunction "because" in example (7a) expressing the cause-effect relationship between the subordinate clause and the main clause. Relational words include not only single conjunctive but also complex conjunctive structures, such as:

(8a) We went by air so that we could get there in time.
(8b) The purpose of our going by air was getting there in time.

In (8a), the subordinate conjunctive structure "so that" changes into a noun "purpose" in (8b).

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d) Nominalization of Environmental Components

We generally express the environmental components in the congruent expression of the clause with prepositional phrases or adverbs, and regard the environmental component as "the process of parasitism on a process" (Halliday, 1994: 151). The prepositional qualities mainly determine the main process realized by the predicate verb in the auxiliary clause. Such as:

(9) They disappeared at the same time.

We can change the sentence (9) into a noun phrase "the concurrence of their disappearances".

In (9a), the time-aligned environmental component "at the same time" changes into a noun "concurrence and the main process "disappeared" into "disappearances." After we nominalize the minor process and the main process respectively, the head of the noun structure is the nominalization of the small process, and the post-modifier is the nominalization of the main process, and we connect them with the conjunction "of." In addition to the use of prepositional phrases, we can also express environmental elements with adverbs. E.g.:

(10) Programs to train people will take longer.

We can change the above sentence into "The extension of the duration of training programs."

In (10), we change the environmental component "longer" into the "extension" and the main process into the "duration."

IV. Non-Arbitrariness of Nominalization

Halliday believes that we associate meaning with each level of language (Zhu Yongsheng, Yan Shiqing, 2000: 96). The grammatical metaphor itself is a meaningful choice. The choice of metaphorical expressions further increases the semantic features (Halliday, 1994: 342). Therefore, grammatical metaphors are rearranged between different language levels, remapping the meaning onto the lexico-grammatical level (Hu Zhuanglin, 2000: 92). The essence of nominalization is "the same signified, different signifiers" (Halliday, 1996; Zhu Yongsheng, Yan Shiqing, 2000: 100). The series of semantic changes caused by nominalization in grammatical form indicates that the choice of "signifier" itself is not arbitrary in itself, and it is related to the intended purpose of the language user. The meaning of processes, attributes, etc. after we transform them into nouns, has undergone certain changes. Some information is missing after we convert them into entities (Halliday, 1994: 353). For example, the participants, tone, and modality related to the "process" are omitted, making the meaning objective and concise.

The users determine the widespread application of nominalization in business discourse due to the characteristics of Business English. Using nouns can keep the same amount of information at the same time, keeping the simple features of business texts. The nominalization of verbs can avoid factors such as tense, tone, and modality, making the entire discourse appear objective, formal, and polite according to the users' intention. Let's understand the non-arbitrariness of nominalization metaphor in business discourse from several examples below.

(11) The owners insist that planned expansion of the premises will ease these pressures by increasing capacity and reducing production cycles. (Williams Ann, 2002: 122).

In this sentence, the subject-verb structure should have been formed by the verb "expand" and its participants. To be more concise and clearer, the speaker uses the nominalization "planned expansion," which is in line with the economic principles of business discourse.

(12a) After they consider the premises and consult amicably, the two parties agree to enter into the contract.

(12b) In consideration of the premises, the two parties, through amicable consultations, agree to enter into this contract.

The original subject "the two parties" is missing due to the nominalization of the verbs "consider" and "consult" in (12a). The object "the premises" has become a post-modifier of "consideration" after its nominalization. The adverbial "amicably" has become the modifier of the nominalization "consultation." Due to the loss of the component of the actor, it is free from human factors, thus, leading to increased objectivity. The structure of nominalization makes the text more objective by hiding the actor.

At the same time, business people mostly would like to show politeness in business communication, and it is an essential feature of business discourse. It is often the key to facilitating trade. Therefore, polite language plays a crucial role in the exchange of business information. Compared with the verb structure, the noun structure appears to be more euphemistic and we frequently use it as a polite expression.

(13) We appreciate the time you took to let the US know of the error, and we sincerely apologize for your disappointment at not finding the sale item at the price that was advertised by mistake in last Sunday's newspaper.

In (13), it uses the qualitative nominalization structure "your disappointment at not finding the sale item at the price that was advertised by mistake in last Sunday's newspaper" to replace the verbal structure in the natural form. The purpose of business is to persuade the other party to accept their ideas and take appropriate measures. Therefore, when the topic is

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beneficial to the other party, the logical subject of the clause is usually "you," otherwise, it is "we" or the topic itself. In this case, it avoids the tone of accusation, makes the tone friendly and facilitates acceptance. In this sentence, the choice of the noun phrase "your disappointment" shows the sincerity of the speaker and fully expresses the proper courtesy.

V. Constructiveness of Nominalization

Halliday & Matthiessen (1999) integrated the working mechanism of metaphor into the lexico-grammatical system. It can not only discover the connection between the semantic features of the different categories contained in the metaphor but also link the individual metaphorical phenomenon with the meaning potential of the whole language, analyze its lexico-grammatical system and interpret human experiences and construct some abstract ideas or ideological mechanisms in social reality. Halliday believes that the expression of human experiences in the form of language is in itself a metaphorical process (Halliday, 1994: 343).

Constructivism believes that people can use the language not only to represent the world but also to construct the world. The process of creating meaning in the cognitive world is not simply a process of reflecting the world but one of designing meaning in interaction with the world in which we play an active role. Tan Wanjun (2014) believes that the discourse itself is constructive. As a necessary resource that constitutes discourse, nominalization of course also has the capacity of discourse construction. Halliday (1996: 10) once pointed out that although this nominalization reduced the original rank, it made the written text complicated, but it facilitated the unfolding and cohesion of discourses. Martin (1993) specifically mentioned that "we use grammatical metaphors as a tool for the composition of the discourse through the development of the theme structure and information structure of the discourse." In the two discourse metaphors of metaphorical theme and metaphorical new information, nominalization is an essential way of realization. From the textual function, we divide the clauses into theme and rhyme. The former is the starting point of the information, and the latter is its development. The information unit of clauses includes known information and new information. In the business discourse, the process of the previous clause is packaged as a noun phrase and serves as the theme of the latter one, followed by the rhyme. We transfer the information focus to the new one. The transfer of information through the nominalization draws readers' attention to the new information. The textual meaning constructed through nominalization contributes to the thematic progression of texts and information development, enhancing their cohesiveness.

After we nominalize a process into an entity, the original dynamic state becomes a static one. The event may or may not happen, and the nominalization gives people the impression that something has happened or existed, which affects the pragmatic presupposition in communication. E.g.:

(14) Your Goods promptly will be considerably appreciated.

In (14), the pragmatic presupposition adopted in the noun structure is "your paying promptly", which is a given fact. If you use the phrase "If you pay promptly," instead of giving people a feeling of a given fact, it shows that this matter still has room for discussion. Nominalization is used here instead of a clause to convey to the reader a message that will become a given fact. This expression changes the pragmatic presupposition in communication. The designation not only gives specific information but also indirectly realizes the purpose of the communicator.

We establish the "theme---rhyme" link to achieve the cohesive function of nominalization in business discourse, which gives the thematic position of a clause an alternative way of expression to avoid monotony. At the same time, nominalization as the theme makes the original process more prominent, and achieves the effects of thematization and foregrounding. For example,

(15) Our director will be visiting Beijing in two weeks, and we think it would be better to discuss this with him. Follow our discussion, and we have decided to offer you an appointment as our sole agent.

The "discussion" in (15) is not only the acceptance of the meaning of the verb "discuss" in the previous sentence but also the theme of the next sentence. It serves as a good anaphora and coherence while also achieving the communicative purpose of highlighting the subject and attracting attention. Li Yuling (2016) believes that nominalization plays a significant role in the transfer of information focus and the smooth transition between sentences.

VI. Summary

Nominalization is, in essence, a mutual interaction between grammar and meaning and is a semantic phenomenon. Using nominalization, we can increase the information density, and conceal their subjective intentions and attitudes, and satisfy the communicative purpose of the communicators can be satisfied. Therefore, the choice of nominalization is not arbitrary. Moreover, nominalization can promote the development of theme and information, facilitate the expansion and cohesion of discourse, and contribute to the construction of discourse meaning. Based on the above analysis of nominalization, we can be see that nominalization plays a fundamental communicative role in the design of business discourse. It makes the text

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more concise, objective, polite, and cohesive. We have a wide use of nominalization in various formal texts. Understanding the classification and features of nominalization helps business activity participants accurately express and communicate in business interactions. Grasping the nominalization helps to analyze and comprehend the communicative function of business discourses, helps us to master the characteristics of business discourses and improves the effectiveness and appropriateness of language use in business discourses.

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