

THE MECHANICS OF EFFECTIVE ORGANISATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE AND THE FUNDAMENTAL EPISTOLARY PRINCIPLES

Comrade S. O. Oluga

Abstract

Correspondence happens to be a commonest means of communication in various organisations used to disseminate vital information and ultimately to aid the attainment of desired organisational goals and objectives. The effectiveness or otherwise of organisational correspondence determines whether or not they will aid the attainment of desired organisational goals and objectives. The effectiveness of organisational correspondence is a function of not just *what* is written, *when* it is written, (to) *where* it is written but, most importantly, *how* it is written. This paper therefore discusses the fundamental “one ‘S’ and six ‘Cs’ epistolary principles of simplicity, clarity, correctness, completeness, conciseness, courtesy and caution as the essential mechanics of effective organisational correspondence. It shows how cognizance of these epistolary principles can ensure successful communication of intended information, make good envoys or ambassadors of organisational letters and eventually aid the attainment of organisational goals and objectives.

Introduction

The word organisation as defined by Rogers and Rogers (1976:6) is “a stable system of individuals who work together to achieve, through hierarchy of ranks and division of labour, common goals.” The *Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary of Current English* by Hornby also gives the first semantic interpretation of the word organisation as “a group of people who form a business, club, etc together in order to achieve a particular aim”. Such an organisation, however, can be a business organisation, social organisation, political organisation, religious organisation, educational or academic organisation, government(al) organisation, non-governmental organisation as well as a multi-national or international organisation.

The word correspondence according to Oluga et al (1998:95) refers to “an important form of written communication which involves the use of letters for the expression of ideas, opinions and feelings or for the transmission of vital messages, requests, information etc from one person, group, department, establishment or organisation to another. Correspondence, according to Oseni (1998: 201), simply refers to a letter written by one person to another or the art of writing letters. Weisman (1985: 291) while discussing the role of technical correspondence in science, technology and industry describes correspondence as the basic communication instrument in business and industry.

One thing that is common to most organisations is that they disseminate and receive information via correspondence from time to time, hence, they write and respond to various types of letters like circulars, memoranda, queries or query letters, promotion letters, commendation letters, enquiry letters, order letters, complaint letters, application letters, goodwill letters etc. However, to be effective, such letters need to be properly written hence, effective correspondence entails or requires not only knowing what to write, where to write and when to write but also knowing how to write to attract the expected reply or response. It is against this background that Cook (1981:23) points out that a letter based on how it is written, determines the success or failure of the writer saying “to fail in that important letter or job application is to fail as a person and the feeling of the failure is reinforced when the letter does not have the desired effect or the job application is unsuccessful”. Sherman and Johnson (1983: 337) also see the inability to write effective letters as an impediment saying, “If you can not write effective letters, you will be seriously handicapped in your career”.

The “how” of organisational correspondence, more than the “what”, “when” and “where” of organisational correspondence, determines the effectiveness or efficacy of organisational correspondence. This also determines how well organisational correspondence or letters represent the organisations from which they originated or emanated. However, it is axiomatic that organisational letters premised on the mechanics of effective organisational correspondence and which observe the fundamental epistolary principles of simplicity, clarity, correctness, completeness, conciseness, courtesy, and caution, that will be discussed one after the other, will always make good envoys or

ambassadors of the organisations they represent.

Principle of Epistolary Simplicity Going by this principle, organisational correspondents, that is, those who write official, business or administrative letters on behalf of or to various organisations should always endeavour to use words and expressions which can be easily comprehended by the intended recipients of such letters. This principle, therefore, discourages the unnecessary display of vocabulary competence via the use of very strange, obscure or esoteric language when writing formal letters to or for organisations. This, of course, can prevent effective communication because the use of incomprehensible words or expressions will not guarantee absolute comprehension as a result of which the receivers of such letters may not be able to respond appropriately. It is in the light of this that Little (1977:85) discourages developing the habit of verbosity which once cultivated may be difficult to shake off. It will therefore, be advisable for organisational correspondents to use the word “riddle” instead of “conundrum”, “enormous” instead of “gargantuan”, “desk” instead of “escritoire”, “shout” instead of “vociferate”, “lust” instead of “concupiscence”, “timid” instead of “pusillanimous”, “unhealthy” instead of “valetudinarian”, “bully” instead of “swashbuckler”, “gloomy” instead of “saturnine”, “insolent” instead of “contumelious”, “hopeful” instead of “sanguine”, “generous” instead of “munificent”, “devour” instead of “gormandize”, “surname” instead of “cognomen”, “pompous” instead of “grandiloquent” or “magniloquent” etc.

Principle of Semantic Clarity Epistolary clarity as described by Ashaolu (1993:173) is saying what one wants to say in a simple straight forward manner. According to the principle of epistolary clarity, organisational correspondents should avoid the use of ambiguous words and expressions that is, those that are capable or susceptible of double or multiple semantic interpretations. Ayodele (1990) further describes an ambiguous expression as a statement which is not clear as to its meaning or which signals more than one meaning. This principle of epistolary clarity when observed or adhered to will prevent a situation where the meaning intended in organisational correspondence or letters will be different from that taken for granted by the recipients of such letters.

Little (1977:50) therefore points out that the aim of organisational correspondents should be to produce or construct sentences or expressions capable of single semantic interpretations every time they write letters. The expression “the Head of Department has instructed students of the Department of Animal Science to bring at least a pen each for their practical examinations,” for example is ambiguous. This is because the word ‘pen’ as used here can either refer to ‘a writing material with a pointed piece of split metal fixed into a holder’ or ‘a small enclosure for poultry, cattle or other purposes’. The expressions “the new students hostel” and “an old typewriters repairer” are also ambiguous because of the way they are constructed. The former can mean either “the students hostel that is new” or “the hostel for new students” while the latter can mean-either “a typewriter repairer who is old” or “a repairer of an old typewriter”. The use of numbers to write the date of organisational letters can also be ambiguous. For example, while “01/02/03” will mean “1st of February, 2003” to those using the British dating system it will mean “2nd of January, 2003” to those using the American dating system.

Principle of Lexical Correctness This principle has to do with lexical accuracy and condemns wrong spelling of words, malapropism or misuse of words by organisational correspondents when writing official business or administrative letters. Organisational correspondents therefore who write for or to various organisations should endeavour to learn the correct spelling of words as they learn the meanings and uses of words. It has been observed that some correspondents still spell “argument” as “arguement”, “government” as “goverment”, “polytechnic” as “polythecnic”, and “environment” as “enviroment”, “pronunciation” as “pronounciation”, “recommend” as “recomend”, “ambiguous” as “ambigous”, “omission” as “ommission”, “admission” as “admission” etc.

An organisational correspondent can misuse words when he decides to use words whose meanings he or she is not very sure of, for example, he can describe somebody who is industrious, hardworking or up and doing as a “busy body” which actually means “somebody who interferes in the affairs of others when his or her help is not wanted”. Malapropisms according to Little (1977:41) are words used in error for other words somewhat like them in sound or appearance, and he advises correspondents to avoid them because they can be damaging. An organisational correspondent therefore, can be guilty of malapropism if he confuses words which may be similar but which actually do not mean the same thing. A good example is a correspondent who says “I want to know the course of the

protest” instead of “I want to know the cause of the protest”, “We can sight/site examples’ instead of “We can cite examples” or “you have not taught of a new idea” instead of “you have not thought of a new idea’.

Principle of Syntactic Correctness Syntactic correctness simply refers to grammatical correctness which Oseni (1998:215) describes as an important hallmark in business correspondence. According to this principle and to ensure epistolary grammaticality, organisational correspondents should make sure that expressions are constructed based on the grammatical rules of the language of communication. In English language, which happens to be the official language of communication in Nigeria, various grammatical rules can be identified like the rule of concord, the rule of parallelism, the rule of word collocation etc. Based on the rule of concord, it is grammatically correct to say “Rice and beans is good as breakfast”, “mango and orange are good fruits”, “the boy as well altogether with his mother is coming”, “Everybody is ready for the exam”, “Two hours is not enough for five questions”. But it is grammatically wrong to say “The boy together with/as well as his mother are* coming”, “Everybody want to study abroad”, “Ten thousand dollars are* not enough”.

Going by the rule of parallelism, it is not very appropriate for an organisational correspondent to say “We like buying raw materials in January, to produce various goods in April, selling goods in August and collecting money in December.” Rather it is better or more appropriate to say “We like to buy raw materials in January, produce goods in April, sell goods in August and collect money in December”. It is also grammatically wrong to say “We are lacking behind”, “Don’t crack your brain”, “the committee comprises of both male and female students”, “he is a mediocre”, or “we will discuss about the issue tomorrow”. But it is grammatical for an organisational correspondent to say “we are lagging behind,” “Don’t rack your brain”, “the committee comprises both male and female students” or “the committee consists of both male and female students”, “he is a mediocrity” and “We will discuss the issue tomorrow”.

The Principle of Epistolary Completeness The principle of completeness is achieved by an organisational correspondent writing or responding to official or business letter if after observing other fundamental principles of effective organisational correspondence, the message or information being communicated is still whole and intact. This means a good official, business or organisational letter should contain all vital facts meant for the intended recipient of the letter without leaving out any aspect of the message. This is because an incomplete message is only fairly better than an uncommunicated or indissemminated message since it cannot attract the exact or complete response from the intended recipient of such a message. This eventually require writing another letter to convey the aspect of the first message left out just to pass the exact or complete message or information to the recipient of the letter so as to attract the expected, exact and complete responses, other things being equal.

In relation to this epistolary (principle of) completeness, Okafor (1993:173) is of the opinion that replies to official or organisational letters should also comply with the principle of completeness, not only by answering all the questions asked or information requested in previous letters but by also giving other desirable relevant information. He believes that the five wh- questions ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘who’, ‘when’ and ‘why’ can be used to determine whether or not the desired relevant information has been supplied. However, the Shakespearian adage ‘the fewer, the merrier’ should be borne in mind while trying to observe this principle so as to have organisational letters that will both complete and concise.

Principle of Epistolary Conciseness An organisational correspondent, when writing official letters for business or administrative purpose, should always try to be as brief or concise as possible. This is the principle of epistolary brevity which involves economizing words so as to prevent the inclusion of unnecessary or irrelevant details which can easily bore readers. A good business, administrative or organisational correspondent, when writing all forms of official letter, therefore, is expected to go straight to the point because some people especially the very busy business or organisational executives do not usually have the patience or luxury of time to peruse too lengthy letters. Little (1977:85) advocates the principle of epistolary conciseness by pointing out that conciseness reduces time used in typing and printing cost of lengthy letters and also saves time spent in reading long epistles as well as papers and other typing materials.

It should however be borne in mind that the principle of epistolary brevity or economy of language should not be observed or achieved at the expense of the principle epistolary completeness (of idea). This

means that a correspondent should not leave out important facts which should be discussed in an organisational letter just because he or she wants to observe the principle of conciseness by all means or to please the intended recipient of the letter by making the message unnecessarily and unreasonably brief and short. Hence, an official letter that is brief or concise will be meaningful and considered effective if only it is also complete, that is, if it briefly and concisely expresses a complete idea, thought or message.

Principle of Epistolary Courtesy This principle propagates linguistic politeness hence an organisational correspondent, when writing a letter for business or administrative purpose, is expected to be ever polite and courteous irrespective of the situation. This means an organisational correspondent is not expected to use rude, abusive or vulgar words or expressions and his language should not reflect his fury or annoyance even if he or she is infuriated or annoyed. Even when problem letters like complaint letters and queries or query letters are to be written, the messages of such letters should be communicated as politely and diplomatically as possible. It is in line with this that Oseni (1998:214) is of the opinion that the tone of organisational business or administrative letters should be courteous, polite and respectful and if possible should even avoid giving orders.

The case of a business organisation that placed order for some goods or commodities to be sold during the Christmas or Easter celebration and whose ordered goods or commodities were brought one month after the Christmas or Easter celebration can be used to illustrate the principle of epistolary courtesy. Going by this principle, it will be inappropriate or impolite for the correspondent writing on behalf of the business organisation in question to write and say "We are highly disappointed when your men eventually brought the goods we ordered for sales two months ago. What the hell do you think we will do with the rubbish just delivered now that Christmas/Easter has come and gone? So, just send your people to come and pack the useless goods/commodities back to your company and make sure you pay back the money collected into our account immediately." Rather, the organisational correspondent can write and say, "We are writing to inform you that the goods we ordered for sales two months ago were delivered late. We have supplied our customers through some other means hence, we would not need the goods/commodities just delivered now. So, we would appreciate if your men could come and pack the goods/commodities back and our money refunded. We still hope to have good business relationship with your organisation. Thank you."

Principle of Epistolary Caution This is an important principle not usually identified in some texts or observed by some correspondents but which Cook (1981:75) identifies and emphasizes. According to the principle of epistolary caution, organisational correspondents should always be very careful when writing letters for business or administrative purposes. They should always think of the likely effects or implications of the messages or information they communicate in their letters and should avoid making some dangerous mistakes that may negatively affect them or the organisation on behalf of which they are communicating. This principle needs to be emphasized and observed because some organisational executives who write and respond to official letters on behalf of their organisation usually write in haste because they do not have luxury of time and time means money to them. However, such letters when faulty or faulted can be used against the writer or the writer's organisation especially in the course of a legal dispute.

Business organisation correspondents therefore, need to be mindful of the principle of caution when writing sales letters and should watch what they say about their goods and services or the attributes they ascribe to them. For example, it is better to say that "Many customers have confirmed that this product can last for ten years" than to say or declare authoritatively that "This product lasts for ten years". This is because the latter expression can be taken for a guarantee that the product will definitely last for ten years. Also, it will be better to say "This product can be affected by liquids" than to say "This product can only be affected by water" because while the former expression entails the latter, the latter does not cover all liquids. However, the position of the law is that "expressio uno, exclusio ulleris", that is, the expression of an item is to the exclusion of the one not mentioned.

Conclusion

It is crystal clear that effective organisational correspondence requires not just knowing the "what," "when" and "where" of organisational correspondence, that is, not just knowing what the content of organisational letters should be, when the letters should be written and where the letters should be sent respectively. Rather, effective organisational correspondence requires, most importantly, knowing the "how" of organisational correspondence even before putting pen to paper or paper on machine i.e. knowing the way effective organisational letters should be written based on or in line with the already discussed fundamental

epistolary principles. It is only organisation letters written with cognizance of the epistolary principles of simplicity, clarity, correctness, completeness, conciseness, courtesy and caution, in addition to knowing what, when and where to write that can be effective, efficient or efficacious and which can make good envoys or ambassadors of the organisations from which they emanate and which they represent.

Reference

- Ayodele, S. O.; Oyeleye, A. L.; Yakubu, S. O. and Ajayi, D. A. (1996). *General English: A Course for the Tertiary Levels*. Ibadan: Bounty Press Limited.
- Cook, M. C. (1981). *People and Communication*. Amersham: Hulton Educational Publications.
- Hornby, A. S. (1974). *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Little, P. (1977). *Communication in Business*. London: Pitman Publishers.
- Nwosu, O. (1996). *The Use of English in Communication*. Ibadan: Africa-Link Books.
- Oluga, S. O. ; Adewusi, C. O. and Babalola, H. A. L. (1998). *Basic Communication Skills*. Lagos: Eipis Publishers.
- Okafor, V.C. (1993). Correspondence. In Ashaolu, A. O.; Fabiyi, O.A. and Eko-Davies, G. R. (eds): *Use of English and Functional Communication*. Ado-Ekiti: Petoa Educational Publishers.
- Oseni, M. A. (1998). *A Comprehensive Approach to Effective Communication in English*. Lagos: Midmic Publishers.
- Rogers, M. E. and Rogers, R. A. (1976). *Communication in Organisations*. New York: The Free Press.
- Sherman, T. A. and Johnson, S. S. (1983). *Modern Technical Writing*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc.
- Weisman, H. M. (1985). *Basic Technical Writing*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co.