

A Study on Syntactic Features and Functions of Logistics English from the Perspective of English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

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Abstract:

Logistics English is a core subdivision of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which serves as the primary communication medium for cross-border logistics industry exchanges. For ESP educators and logistics practitioners, comprehension and translation of logistics texts are hindered by distinctive syntactic structures unique to logistics discourse. Existing domestic research prioritizes lexical features and discourse genre analysis, yet systematic research targeting logistics English syntax and its pragmatic motivations remains insufficient. The study constructs a three-level integrated analytical model covering professional context, pragmatic function and syntactic form, revealing that syntactic selection in logistics English is fundamentally driven by industry demands for linguistic accuracy, communication efficiency and normative legal expression. Corresponding pedagogical and translation strategies are proposed to fill the gap in systematic syntactic teaching of logistics ESP and improve the accuracy and standardization of international logistics document translation.

Keywords:

Logistics English, English for Specific Purposes, Syntactic Features, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Pragmatic Functions, Translation Strategies

1. Introduction

Driven by deepening economic globalization, cross-border logistics business has achieved sustained expansion worldwide, making logistics English an indispensable professional language for international trade, transportation and supply chain management. As a typical ESP variety, logistics English carries distinct linguistic characteristics distinguishable from general English, especially in syntactic construction, which is designed to meet the industry's strict requirements for rigorous logic, neutral statement and concise information delivery.

Unlike general English, logistics texts such as transport contracts, bills of lading, business claims and operation guidelines require syntactic structures that can integrate multi-layer restrictive conditions while avoiding subjective personal expression. Nevertheless, current domestic research on logistics English concentrates primarily on terminology sorting, metaphorical discourse analysis and generalized translation skills

[7,8]. Most studies only enumerate scattered syntactic phenomena without systematic corpus classification or in-depth exploration of the pragmatic motivations behind syntactic choices. Learners and industry translators tend to interpret logistics sentences following general English grammatical rules, frequently resulting in semantic distortion, rigid literal translation and communication barriers in cross-border logistics operations. This predicament is aggravated by the inherent linguistic divergence between hypotaxis-dominant English and parataxis-dominant Chinese.

Against this research background, the present paper aims to systematically sort out the core syntactic features of logistics English and interpret their pragmatic functions under the dual theoretical support of ESP and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). This study draws on authentic logistics corpus spanning 2010–2025 to build a context-function-form integrated analytical model, and further proposes operable suggestions for logistics English ESP teaching and document translation. By doing so, it seeks to supplement the insufficient syntactic research within domestic ESP studies and provide practical theoretical support for frontline teaching and translation practice of logistics English.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts qualitative corpus analysis as the core research approach, combining theoretical deduction based on ESP and SFL frameworks. Primary textual materials are collected from authentic logistics documents, textbooks and industry reports, while theoretical literature concerning ESP development, systemic functional grammar and logistics linguistic research are synthesized to form a complete analytical framework.

2.1. Selection Standard of Corpus Materials

The corpus adopted in this research covers four authentic text categories produced between 2010 and 2025, selected according to three screening criteria: authenticity, professionalism and representativeness:

- (1) Standard international logistics legal documents: transportation contracts, commercial invoices, bills of lading, packing lists and letters of credit;
- (2) Daily logistics business correspondence: inquiry letters, quotation letters, cargo claim letters and payment settlement notices;
- (3) Peer-reviewed academic papers and official industry operation reports on supply chain and international logistics.

2.2. Analysis Framework and Research Procedures

The whole analysis follows a standardized three-tier research procedure, which serves as the core framework for sorting syntactic features and exploring their pragmatic connotations:

- (1) Systematic Description: Label and classify high-frequency syntactic phenomena extracted from corpus texts, summarize six typical syntactic features with representative corpus examples;
- (2) Pragmatic Interpretation: Combine the learning-centered principle of ESP theory to excavate industry communication demands that restrict syntactic selection,

including requirements for accuracy, efficiency, standardization and interpersonal appropriateness [3];

(3) Functional Correspondence: Match each syntactic feature with Halliday's three language metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, textual), establish the logical chain from professional context demand to pragmatic function and final syntactic form selection [2].

Since this research adopts interpretive qualitative analysis, its objective is not to carry out quantitative frequency statistics of syntactic features, but to construct a systematic syntactic-function analysis system and derive targeted teaching and translation guidance for ESP logistics classrooms [4,6].

3. Results and Discussion

This section first objectively presents six core syntactic features extracted from corpus coding results, then conducts in-depth discussion on their pragmatic functions under SFL metafunction theory, constructs a three-level integrated analysis model, and finally analyzes practical implications for logistics English teaching and translation practice.

3.1. Six Core Syntactic Features Identified from Corpus Analysis

Corpus sorting shows six syntactic structures appear with extremely high frequency across all types of logistics texts, forming the unique syntactic marker system of logistics English. Each feature is explained with authentic corpus examples as follows.

3.1.1. Nominalization

Nominalization is the most prominent syntactic feature of logistics English, referring to the transformation of verbs and adjectives into abstract nominal phrases to replace complete subordinate clauses. Such structures convert dynamic operational actions into static professional concepts, eliminate subjective personal subjects and greatly improve text information density. Typical example: we express *we adopt as the optimization of cross-border supply chain efficiency*.

3.1.2. Passive Voice

Passive constructions are widely distributed in logistics operation specifications and liability clauses. By placing goods, payment, cargo and other core business objects at the sentence subject position, passive voice weakens or conceals action performers to strengthen the objectivity and neutral binding force of legal texts. Typical example: Full payment will be effected upon receipt of complete shipping documents.

3.1.3. Long and Compound Complex Sentences

Logistics contracts and liability provisions contain multi-layer restrictive conditions concerning time, location, rights and compensation scope, forming embedded long sentences connected by logical conjunctions including *provided that*, *whereas*, *hereinafter*. All constraint information is integrated into a single sentence to guarantee rigorous logic and avoid semantic omission.

Typical example: Provided that the carrier has fulfilled full due diligence obligations, the carrier's compensation liability shall be limited to the amount agreed in the original bill of lading.

3.1.4. Postmodifiers

Noun phrases extensively adopt prepositional phrases, participial phrases and restrictive attributive clauses as postpositive modifiers. Following English's end-weight principle, postmodifiers carry multi-layer professional limiting information without creating cumbersome pre-modifier stacks.

Typical example: Any cargo dispute arising from the signed international transportation contract

3.1.5. Non-Finite Verbs

Present participle, past participle and infinitive phrases replace adverbial clauses to express time sequence, causal relations and purpose, simplifying sentence structures while maintaining clear logical layers.

Typical example: Having received the formal shipping advice, the buyer shall complete cargo insurance procedures within three working days.

3.1.6. Ellipsis and Inversion

Standardized fixed-format logistics business texts adopt elliptical structures to streamline expression; hypothetical conditional clauses often omit the conjunction *if* and adopt subject-verb inversion to enhance formal legal solemnity.

Ellipsis example: Hence the wide application of fourth-party logistics in cross-border transportation.

Inversion example: Should the goods be found damaged upon arrival, the consignee shall submit a written claim notice to the carrier within seven calendar days.

3.2. Pragmatic Functions of Syntactic Structures Based on Three Metafunctions

Combined with Halliday's ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions, the six syntactic features jointly realize four indispensable pragmatic functions in professional logistics discourse[2].

3.2.1. High-Density Information Organization Function (Ideational Metafunction)

Nominalization, postmodifiers and long compound sentences undertake this core function. Multi-layer embedded structures and compact nominalized phrases concentrate massive professional rules, liability restrictions and operational procedures in limited text space, realizing precise, complete and standardized expression of logistics professional information.

3.2.2. Formal and Objective Stylistic Construction Function (Ideational + Interpersonal Metafunction)

Passive voice, nominalization and non-finite verbs coordinate to shape the neutral, authoritative and binding stylistic characteristic of logistics legal documents. They remove personal subjective perspective, weaken human actors and highlight objective industry norms and contractual legal force.

3.2.3. Polite Indirect Interpersonal Expression Function (Interpersonal Metafunction)

Passive voice and inverted conditional sentences serve as the main carriers of this function, especially applied in claim letters and complaint correspondence. By hiding action subjects, these structures reduce the negative face threat brought by accusations

and demands, balancing reasonable claim expression and long-term cooperative business relationship maintenance.

3.2.4. Discourse Cohesion and Logical Coherence Function (Textual Metafunction)

Ellipsis, inversion and passive voice adjust sentence thematic information focus. Passive voice unifies discourse topics centered on cargo, documents and goods; inversion highlights critical restrictive conditions; ellipsis achieves semantic cohesion between adjacent sentences, improving overall text fluency and logical consistency.

3.3. Three-Tier Integrated Context-Function-Form Analytical Model

This study constructs a hierarchical logical model to interpret the internal generation mechanism of logistics English syntactic features, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Three-Tier Integrated Model of Logistics English Syntactic Analysis.

Hierarchy Level	Core Research Object	Specific Connotation
Macro Context Level	Logistics industry professional communication demands	Linguistic accuracy, expression efficiency, document standardization, contractual authority, interpersonal business appropriateness, text readability
Middle Function Level	Pragmatic communicative functions	Information organization; formal objective stylization; polite indirect interpersonal expression; textual cohesion and coherence
Micro Form Level	Representative syntactic features	Nominalization, passive voice, long compound sentences, non-finite verbs, postmodifiers, ellipsis & inversion

The core logical mechanism of the model: macro professional communication demands of logistics industry determine required pragmatic functions; different pragmatic functions further restrict writers' selection of specific syntactic forms. This three-level model makes up for the defects of previous studies that only list grammatical phenomena without systematic functional interpretation.

3.4. Pedagogical and Translation Implications Derived from Syntactic-Function Analysis

3.4.1. Implications for Logistics English ESP Teaching

(1) Build a systematic teaching framework centered on the six major syntactic features, breaking the scattered single grammar teaching mode of general English;

(2) Adopt form-function interactive teaching logic: while explaining syntactic structures, guide learners to recognize their pragmatic purposes in differentiated logistics scenarios (contracts, business letters, operation guides);

(3) Introduce authentic authentic documents into classroom training to narrow the gap between textbook learning and real workplace logistics communication;

(4) Design contrastive training targeting Chinese parataxis vs. English hypotaxis differences to reduce mother tongue negative transfer in learners' reading and translation.

3.4.2. Implications for Logistics English Translation

All translation activities should follow the functional equivalence principle instead of rigid word-for-word literal translation:

Flexible conversion of passive voice: transform English passive structures into Chinese active sentences or non-subject sentences according to text genre and context;

Conversion of nominalization: convert dense English nominal phrases into Chinese verb-object dynamic structures to conform to Chinese expression habits;

Layered splitting of long compound sentences: decompose multi-clause complex sentences by internal logical relations and rearrange word order for smooth Chinese expression;

Genre-adaptive stylistic adjustment: adjust the formality degree of translation language based on document types (legal contracts, business correspondence, operational manuals).

3.5. Root Causes of Learners' Difficulties in Logistics English Syntax Comprehension

The widespread confusion among ESP learners and translators concerning logistics English syntactic structures stems from multiple instructional and input factors. First, most logistics English teaching attaches excessive importance to vocabulary memorization while lacking systematic syntactic instruction linking form and function. Second, learners have limited exposure to authentic multi-genre logistics corpus, unable to perceive the corresponding relation between syntactic choices and communication purposes. Third, classroom teaching still prioritizes sentence-level grammatical correctness over discourse pragmatics and professional contextual logic. Finally, many translators rely excessively on Chinese-English literal translation strategies, leading to failure to recognize the static nominalized and objective passive structures characteristic of logistics English [1,5,6].

Taken together, these factors indicate that difficulties in processing logistics English syntax are not simply caused by insufficient grammar knowledge, but reflect a notable gap between general English classroom teaching and the actual professional communication demands of the logistics industry.

4. Conclusions

Logistics English, as a typical ESP branch, possesses six stable, high-frequency syntactic features that distinguish it from general English: nominalization, passive voice, long compound sentences, non-finite verbs, postmodifiers, ellipsis and inversion. These syntactic forms jointly undertake four core pragmatic functions including information compression, objective stylistic construction, polite interpersonal expression and textual coherence maintenance, corresponding to Halliday's three metafunctions of language. This research constructs a three-tier integrated analytical model covering professional context, pragmatic function and syntactic form, verifying that all syntactic choices in logistics English are essentially responses to the industry's special demands for accuracy, efficiency and normative legal expression.

This study delivers dual theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, it fills the research gap of insufficient systematic syntactic research within domestic ESP studies and expands the application scope of Systemic Functional Linguistics in industry-specific professional discourse analysis. Practically, the form-function interactive

teaching framework and functional equivalence translation strategies proposed can provide operable guidance for ESP logistics English classrooms and cross-border logistics document translation work, effectively reducing communication barriers in international logistics business.

This research still has certain limitations. First, the corpus scale adopted cannot cover all subdivisions of logistics business, without quantitative frequency comparison of syntactic features across different text genres. Second, the proposed syntactic teaching strategies have not been verified through controlled classroom teaching experiments. Third, horizontal comparative analysis between logistics English and other ESP varieties (medical English, finance English) is not included.

Future research directions are put forward as follows: First, adopt corpus linguistics quantitative methods to count the frequency distribution of six syntactic features across different logistics text types. Second, carry out teaching intervention experiments to test the actual learning effect of form-function interactive teaching mode. Third, conduct cross-ESP comparative research on syntactic features to summarize universal and industry-specific syntactic rules of professional English discourse.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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