

Stylistic Features of Business E-mails

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Abstract

E-mail has become, in recent years, due to the increasing use of the Internet, one of the most common, if not, the most important means of business and personal communication. At the end of the 20th century, e-mail was widely adopted as a means of communication between companies, replacing many of the functions of workplace memoranda. It is a main communication medium and the corporate world could no longer function without it. This paper analyzes a variety of stylistic features of business e-mails, including the use of contractions, abbreviations, ellipsis, characteristics relating to grammatical complexity. In e-mails, the tendency is towards linguistic economy, expressivity and the users' attempts to imitate an informal oral style. The majority of linguistic characteristics that differentiate e-mail from traditional workplace means of communication function as markers of informal style and reflect the fact that e-mail users seek to imitate spoken conversational style to express a friendly orientation towards the people they address to. In the same time, e-mail users show the willingness to experiment with language, leading to the creation of a variety of communication with a more conversational flavour than other forms of writing.

Key-words: business e-mail, stylistic features, linguistic features

1. Introduction

Recently, the changes in technology have influenced everyday interaction and have brought new electronic modes of communication. According to Gains (82), one of these forms of communication is electronic mail, employed at many work-sites and within large institutions. Therefore, as Hawisher and Moran observe (626), electronic mail has become part of the daily routine. Baron (187) states that e-mail has emerged as a system of language conveyance in situations where neither speech nor writing can easily substitute. In a different study, Baron (*Letters* 146) argues that what has led to the success of electronic mail is its convenience, marginal cost, speed of transmission and flexibility. And the author goes on, "e-mail tends to be more casual lexicon, to be less carefully edited, and to assume a greater degree of familiarity with the interlocutor." One of the communication's purposes is to transmit a clear and direct message, therefore, e-mail has become one of the most acceptable means of communication characterized, as Cameron (29) states, by "a preference for directness over indirectness." On the other hand, e-mail is still a written form of communication, retaining the characteristics of a more formal type than spoken language.

2. Why is e-mail so popular?

According to the *Daily Mail*, "[R]esearchers found that the average employee does just four hours of productive work. The remaining hours are spent fielding unnecessary phone calls, or wasting time by surfing the Internet and gossiping." The conclusion is that at least one hour a day that hypothetical average employee spends dealing with e-mail a day.

In their study, Nahar Al-Ali and Sahawneh (40-64) state that e-mail has “pragmatic and social functions.” The pragmatic function is obvious in its use in the academic and business environments. The social function consists in the mail’s privacy in that it enables participants to interact in a less constrained way than when face-to-face. (Baron 205)

Recent studies have shown that workplaces tend to develop their own unique e-mail style, reflecting organizational cultural differences. For example, if we compare the e-mail messages exchanges, it can be seen that the business companies’ messages use a semi-formal style, do not incorporate features from conversational discourse, tend not to include an opening greeting, and use few features of simplified register. By contrast, the educational institutions e-mails show a range of styles. They adopt features from conversational discourse (e.g., *well, you see*), include some forms of greeting, and often refer to the medium itself.

E-mail is increasingly replacing many of the functions of workplace memoranda. Research suggests that e-mail has a unique place among other types of written workplace communication. Murray (414) notes the use of linguistic features not typically associated with traditional business letters or memoranda in synchronous computer-mediated communication, that is e-mail. Such characteristics include the use of *right* as a sentence tag, incomplete sentences, and high interpersonal involvement (as demonstrated by personal pronoun use). According to Waldvogel (2007), linguistic economy plays an important role in the exchange of communication within a company, being a very sensible issue, constantly raising criticism considering the objectives of communication. Coulmas (XII) considers that linguistic economy is in constant conflict with the need for comprehensibility. If language use is viewed in terms of a means-ends efficiency, linguistic economy can also be in conflict with the ‘expenditure’ required to maintain social or phatic contact between participants. Coupland et al. (207-230) are in favour of a “negotiative” perspective of phatic communication, stating that discourse may be oriented to as phatic, dependent upon factors such as interactional goals. In a workplace situation where people must also interact face-to-face, phatic contact may be especially important.

Another controversial issue is the oral feature of e-mails. Some researchers consider it a particularly complex issue. For example, Herring (81-105) compares the structure of e-mail messages to that of personal letters. There have been also other linguists who have described the mode of e-mail as basically “written” but these authors have also described e-mail as having linguistic features characteristic of spoken conversation. In his book, *Language and the Internet*, David Crystal provides a detailed look at the linguistic features of several online communication media. The author examines the linguistic conventions used in these separate media and how they differ from not only real life speech and traditional forms of writing, but also how they differ from each other.

Crystal (41) concludes that the language of the World Wide Web is furthest away from speech, chat-group and virtual world interactions are closer to speech, “and e-mails sit uncertainly in the middle.” When Crystal (47) applied written language criteria to e-mail, he concluded that the latter is “identical to neither speech nor writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties of both.”

3. Linguistic features of e-mail

The style of e-mail is less formal than other forms of written workplace communication and contains characteristics traditionally considered “oral” or similar to speech. According to Ko (1996), speech-like features are typically claimed to result from the temporal constraints of the medium. E-mail writers try to imitate spoken conversational style in order to express a friendly attitude towards their partners of communication exchange. One of the reasons for doing this is that their conversational partners are usually co-workers with whom they also interact face-to-face.

Generally, the linguistic features of e-mail contribute to the creation of a variety of communication that, while written in substance, has a more informal, conversational flavour than other forms of business communication. The review of the literature dealing with the linguistic features of e-mails reveals a list of features with a higher frequency:

1. Space, case, punctuation and spelling

1.1. Space

a. Omission of punctuation - This form of omission refers to the fact that punctuation in the form of full stops, commas, exclamation marks, question marks etc. is missing altogether.

b. Unconventional punctuation - The term “unconventional punctuation” refers to the fact that punctuation marks are used in an irregular and alternative way - for example, several punctuation marks in a row as well as a mixture of punctuation marks following one another.

1.2. Case

a. All low case, all capitals or a mix of these

In terms of case, Crystal (87) puts forward that there is “a strong tendency to use lower-case everywhere.” In consequence, “the ‘save the keystroke’ principle is widely found in e-mails, chatgroups, and virtual worlds, where whole sentences can be produced without capitals.” (Crystal 87) Likewise, the linguist emphasizes that “messages wholly in capitals are considered to be ‘shouting’, and usually avoided.” (Crystal 87)

1.3. Spelling and punctuation – Regarding the punctuation in e-mails, Crystal (89) emphasizes the fact that “punctuation tends to be minimalist in most situations, and completely absent in some e-mails and chat exchanges.” Moreover, he states: “some do not use it at all, either as a consequence of typing speed, or through not realizing that ambiguity can be one of the consequences.” (Crystal 89) The author continues, “unusual combinations of punctuation marks can occur, such as (to express pause) ellipsis dots (...) in any number, repeated hyphens (---), or the repeated use of comas (,,,)”, adding that “emphasis and attitude can result in exaggerated or random use of punctuation, such as !!!!!!! or £\$£\$%!” (Crystal 89) Besides, Crystal (89) argues that “some odd combinations of punctuation marks can appear at the end of a sentence.” The lack of punctuation is an indicator that the writer wants to save some time. However, the lack of punctuation sometimes leads to increased waiting time due to ambiguous utterances that require clarification.

e.g. Subject: Re: Your product

From: arielb@rice.edu -

Here is the file.

Attachments: your_product.pif 23k Lies, lies, lies, solely designed to get you to run the attached .EXE file.

Here is the archive with those information, you asked me. And don't forget, it is strongly confidential!!!

Seya, man.

P.S. Don't forget my fee ;)

2. Grammatical features

2.1. Omission of different parts of speech

a. Subject pronoun

Sometimes, in e-mails either the subject or a pronoun is omitted in the sentence. By not including the subject/pronoun in sentences a lot of time is saved, and, what is more, the reduced sentences seem to be equally understandable as those that are *not* reduced in terms of the subject/pronoun.

e.g. From: reliablelandscapes@domain.com

Subject: Proposal

Lynn,

Did you get my proposal last week? *Haven't heard back and wanted to make sure.*

Can you please call me so we can discuss?

Thanks!

Peter

b. Verb phrase

The omission of verb phrases, like the omission of subject/pronoun, is most likely a consequence of the fast-paced character of e-mails. Thus by leaving out verb phrases lots of time is saved. As with reduced sentences in terms of the subject/pronoun, reduced sentences in terms of verb phrases are evenly understandable as those that are *not* reduced in this way.

3. Logotypes

a. Emoticons

The use of emoticons refers to the usage of textual expressions that correspond to the writer's state of mind or facial expression. Referring to the use of emoticons, or so-called textual expressions, Werry (59) explains that the e-mail writer "employs a set of codes and conventions whereby words and visual images are used to symbolize gestural qualities of face-to-face communication." For example the textual expression (;-)) indicates a wink corresponding to what the writer is thinking, or his facial expression. The textual expression (T_T) signals that the writer is bored or annoyed, whereas the textual expression (:L), illustrating an outstretched tongue, indicates that the writer is exasperating. By adding such textual expressions, it becomes easier for the recipient of an utterance to understand how the utterance in question is meant to be interpreted.

4. Lexical features and abbreviations

a. Colloquial lexicon

The use of colloquial lexicon, then, refers to the usage of everyday, dialectal expressions as well as various "fillers".

e.g. *Hi Kieron,*

Sorry to post through the forum, but as you are on here quite a lot I thought it might be a good place to catch you - as *im* sure you probably get hundreds of e-mails etc *everyday*.

I was simply wondering if you would consider promoting the HSBC credit card on your cards site? I believe you may have featured our marbles card previously, (prior to its closing). In the marbles days you may have been contacted by colleague Andy Bowley.

I would really like to work with you, as I really rate your Blog, and it would be great to have some top affiliates on-board who are open to a bit of innovation, and can give us some feedback on the programme, whilst also driving some volumes.

If you are interested, *please feel free to drop me a note* on here, apply through CJ, or *give me a shout to discuss..*

b. Abbreviation/clipping

Conventional abbreviations refer to abbreviations that are agreed, or generally accepted, in Standard English. Werry (53) argues that in e-mails, “a mixture of various constraints such as temporal, spatial and social ones function as important restrictive conditions that control the size and form of the communication taking place there.” Furthermore, the author adds that this manifests itself in the form of a variety of abbreviations that are made use of in e-mails. Accordingly, like in most contexts, abbreviations are used in order to save time and space.

All these linguistic features are indicators of a more informal, ‘oral’ style, breaking the traditional rules of standard written communication. Abbreviations/clippings and the use of lowercase instead of uppercase can also be related to informality. According to Horowitz and Samuels (83-116), contractions are specific to less formal types of spoken communication, such as personal conversations, than in more formal types of written communication, such as business letters. () The use of exclamation marks, repetition of letters or punctuation for emphasis, and the use of capitalization for emphasis marks the ‘oral’ character in written language. The tendency towards informal spellings and word usage in e-mails, as well as the creative use of capitalization, spelling, and punctuation to convey effects of gesture and tone, is a mark of linguistic innovation in e-mail.

4. Linguistic features of business e-mails

Successful business people realize that everything that reflects on them or their business has to be positioned to impress. From business cards to dress all are opportunities to impress. The same applies to e-mail. Regardless of all the studies about e-mail being informal and this being a new age, professionalism and command of the written word will never go out of style. The business e-mail is an opportunity to impress a business partner or someone who is considering doing business with the writer.

Regarding the stylistic features of business e-mail correspondence, there are not too many studies devoted to this subject. Gimenez (237-251) observes that the spoken nature of electronically mediated communication has started to affect business written communication, making it more informal and personalized, and showing a tendency of a more flexible register. Nahar Al-Ali and Sahawneh (40-64) consider that e-mail messages, in comparison to formal business templates, tend to be more “speech-like” regarding the ease and rapidity of production and transmission and more “written-like” because they are written and need to rely more on the typed word. Yet, there are studies showing that commercial e-mails follow the linguistic conventions adopted in standard written business English. To support this idea, the greetings and closings in e-mails come as a proof.

In general, business e-mails follow the formula of traditional letters by having a complimentary close followed by the sender’s name or other identifying information, yet e-mail writers use a varied set of complimentary closes than letter writers do. In his analysis, Crystal (104) observes that “the influence of traditional letter-writing is evident in the overwhelming tendency to place each element on a separate line, usually spaced away from

the message body.” Yet, in comparison to business letters, in business e-mails greetings and closings perform a very important role. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (138) state: “Greetings and farewells offer formulas to ease the strain created for face by the beginnings and ends of interactions.” Greetings and closings are expressions of people’s relations at work and, on an organizational level, of the organizational culture of the workplace. Crystal (100) has noted that between people who know each other, “Greetingless messages are usually promptly sent responses, where the responder sees the message as the second part of a two-part interaction (an adjacency pair), for which an introductory greeting is inappropriate.” Most business e-mails usually open with: *Dear Sir/Madam, To whom it may concern, Dear Sir(s), Dear Mr, Dear Ms.* Most of the messages use the epistolary convention for opening starting with an address term. The respondents in business e-mails usually end the body of the e-mail message with a conventional polite ending borrowed from print epistolary correspondence conventions: *I look forward to hearing from you (soon), Thank you ((so/very) much in advance) for your time/consideration, or I look forward to your reply, or I appreciate your time/consideration.*

The use of contractions in business e-mails is an ongoing debate. Business writing today is much less formal than it was years ago, mainly due to the influence of e-mail. Most people use e-mail as an alternative to face-to-face conversation where informality is key. Since people frequently use contractions when speaking, it is certainly acceptable in some researchers’ opinion to use contractions in most of the daily business writing. Among the reasons put forward are: (a) *contractions make web-based or e-mail copy easy to read* (most of the time reading an e-mail, web or blog copy is harder than reading a paper based copy), (b) *contractions add a friendly non-confrontational tone* (lack of tone in business communication often develops unintended conflict between people because their messages are misinterpreted). Yet, the number of abbreviations or acronyms should be limited to e-mail exchanges with co-workers or others who understand the lingo, and the writer of the e-mail must be sure the recipient knows what the terms stand for. Generally, emoticons like the Smiley are useful and appropriate in many situations, such as e-mailing friends and family, or expressing the emotional content of a message while posting to a blog, on a message board, or other online forum. In highly formal e-mail communications it is inadvisable to use Smileys or other emoticons, but researchers say that in less formal business correspondence they can be appropriate. If the sender of the e-mail has a social relationship with a business associate, emoticons can be perfectly appropriate. The use of smiley icons denotes a casual and even playful tone in an e-mail, therefore it is important for the writer to consider if the use of the Smiley will be perceived as unprofessional in some cases. Also, it may happen that the recipient of the e-mail does not understand the use of Smileys. Older professionals, in particular, may not have experience using or receiving emoticons. Therefore, the question is not so much if they approve, but if they actually understand the intended meaning of including emoticons in the message.

The increasing use of online communication has implications for the ethos of business communicators. Researchers have demonstrated that the character of the writer can be assessed based on various nonverbal cues in e-mails. Capitalization of letters is one of such cues. Critics argued that the use of all lowercase was insulting and disrespectful of the recipients, especially in business e-mails because one has to keep in mind that when it comes to business e-mail, perception is the only reality. Therefore, capitalization is an important aspect. Doing so can make all the difference in the world as to whether the writer will be perceived as someone who is a true professional.

5. Conclusions

Business e-mail is a combination of informal speech, formal written communication and instant delivery. Before e-mail only the fax has been a type of business correspondence capable of delivering itself, but e-mail delivers the message quicker and easier. Business e-mails have common features with business correspondence (business letters, memos and faxes) and at the same time this type of communication in business has something absolutely unique. The importance of greetings and closings as a linguistic resource lies in the affective role they play. The choice of greeting or closing and its presence or absence in an e-mail message conveys not only an interpersonal message enabling the writer to negotiate his or her workplace relationships but also contributes to the creation of a friendly or less friendly workplace culture and, in turn, reflects this culture. Through the linguistic choices they make, people construct their own social identity and that of others. Like many other linguistic tokens, greetings and closings encode social information.

Regarding the emoticons like Smileys should only be used in the most informal of business correspondence, or when the sender has a close relationship with the recipient. The sender should never use a smiley or other emoticon in a formal business memo, proposal or communication. There is more variation in the language used in e-mails, because writers are less constrained to conform to certain standards. Probably due to this lack of standardization, the style of business e-mail seems to be influenced by the style of personal e-mails, using many characteristics of spoken language (for example, contractions).

Although there is a great difference between the “modern” and the “traditional” usage of layout, punctuation, date, salutation, endings, complimentary close and vocabulary, we must say that both styles are still in use in business correspondence.

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