

A Discourse Analysis of E-mail Messages in a Malaysian Business Community

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Abstract

The study attempts to investigate recurrent grammatical features and functions of electronic mail discourse in a selected business community, comprising executives in a Malaysian public limited company. It also examines whether the electronic mail system has influenced language forms in the executives' e-mail discourse. Differences between language in the e-mail discourse and language in conventional business writing are explored too.

The corpus comprises 102 electronic mail messages from the executives' routine communication in work contexts. The study examines grammatical features, communicative functions and discourse features of the messages.

Findings reveal a predominance of main clauses in imperative and declarative moods, and subordinate clauses denoting purpose and reason, reflecting that e-mail communication of the community is used more for requesting and informing, and less for enquiring. Other discourse features like opening salutation, opening statement, closing statement and closing salutation are also found in the e-mail messages although they are not compulsory for such a communication.

It is hoped that the language features and functions, and other discourse features identified in the e-mail communication of the business community would contribute towards pedagogy and course design for English for Business Communication, as well as for e-mail communication at the workplace .

Introduction

Computer-mediated communication, particularly in the form of electronic-mail (e-mail), has become a dominant mode of communication within and between organisations. Since many students will be using electronic systems for workplace communication, we need insights into the nature of such a communication to assist students in acquiring "its particular characteristics, in the same way we teach spoken English, writing, and the use of telephones" (Murray 1988: 4).

According to Angell & Heslop (1994: 3), the fast-paced e-mail medium "makes different demands on writing style and has its own unique conventions". What then are these demands on writing style and the unique conventions of e-mail communication in the local business community?

This article is a summary of a discourse analysis of e-mail messages from executives in a Malaysian public limited company. It hopes to provide some clues on how people communicate via e-mail at the workplace and for what purposes, and the linguistic features involved.

The study attempts to investigate linguistic features of e-mail discourse in the business community, the functions of the discourse in the community and the factors which may have contributed to linguistic features of the discourse. The study is based on the rationale that:

- a discourse analysis that is not based on grammar is not an analysis at all, but simply a running commentary on a text" (Halliday 1985: xvii);
- discourse analysis for ESP should not only be descriptive but also be explanatory; a writer's purpose(s) should also be examined, not just the forms in the discourse (Robinson 1991);
- authentic data is obtained from natural setting – the research was aimed at investigating e-mail communication as it routinely occurred in the community selected; linguistic data is in the form of whole texts.

Research Methods

Research methods included collecting e-mail texts from key informant, discussions with key informant and examining company documents.

Electronic-mail messages of 23 executives in a Malaysian public limited company were obtained through the key informant, an employee of the company which deals with office computer systems. An IT (Information Technology) Training Sales Specialist with 8 years working experience in the company, and in e-mail communication, she had agreed to provide e-mail texts from routine communication at the company and to verify data.

Company documents examined for information on the workplace culture included company prospectus for shareholders, departmental brochures and job description of executives holding different positions. The e-mail communication of the executives was selected for the study because English is the major language of their operation, and e-mail is part of their daily workplace communication, besides telephone and face-to-face communication.

The Corpus

The corpus comprises 102 e-mail messages of the executives in work contexts, covering only the executives' e-mail communication with each other, and with business partners and clients from December, 1998 to May, 1999. According to the key informant, the e-mail messages provided for the study were actually 70% of the overall e-mail communication among the executives. The remaining 30% of the e-mail communication in the company were not provided by the key informant for reasons of confidentiality. Thus, the corpus can be said to be fairly representative of the range of e-mail communication in that community.

Data Analysis

In analysing the data, the researcher adopted the suggestion of Brown and Yule (1983) to describe regularities in linguistic realizations used by individuals to convey meanings and intentions in a discourse. To identify such "regularities" in the e-mail messages, the researcher based her description on the "frequency with which a particular linguistic feature occurs" (Brown & Yule 1983: 22) in her data. As postulated by Brown and Yule (1983), the frequency of occurrence need not be as high as 90% to qualify as a regularity since the discourse analyst is mainly concerned with the level of frequency that is significant in "perceptual terms" (Brown & Yule 1983: 22). Thus, the linguistic features examined and described in this study may not necessarily be those that have a frequency of occurrence as high as 90%.

Due to the modest size of the corpus, a detailed statistical analysis was not conducted. Instead, a frequency count of the number of occurrences of features in the messages was conducted to support findings.

The e-mail messages were examined for recurrent grammatical features as it was felt that grammatical description is fundamental in a discourse analysis (Halliday 1985; McCarthy 1991). Following one of the three levels of linguistic analysis suggested by Bhatia (1993: 24-28), the e-mail texts were analysed quantitatively by studying the specific grammatical features which are "predominantly used" (Bhatia 1993: 24). This is done by a frequency count of the grammatical features related to clauses, different types of mood, tenses and use of modals. With this type of analysis, it is hoped that relevant empirical evidence is provided to "confirm or disprove some of the intuitive and impressionistic statements that we all tend to make about high or low incidence of certain lexico-grammatical features" (Bhatia 1993: 25) of a certain type of discourse. However, to avoid emphasis on only surface features in the e-mail texts, the study also investigated the way communicative functions were accomplished in the discourse. The study attempted to explore the reason(s) e-mail writers made certain language choices. Thus, description of the data is not just related to language forms in the e-mail messages, but also to functions of language forms in the e-mail texts.

During the discourse analysis, works of grammar exponents like Halliday (1985) and McCarthy (1991) were also referred to for insights into the rationale of language choice and linguistic features in the data. Reliable sources of grammar forms and functions like *Collins Cobuild English Grammar* (1995) and Betty S. Azar's (1989) grammar textbook, *Understanding and Using English Grammar* were also referred to when analysing language forms in the corpus.

Analysis of grammatical features in the data focused on main clauses and subordinate clauses, following the rationale that clauses are the "larger units" (Halliday 1985: 21) of the discourse structure and "it is the larger units that function more directly in the realization of higher-level patterns" (Halliday 1985: 21).

Main clauses were examined in terms of the different moods they are in - the imperative, declarative or interrogative. This focus was based on the premise that the identification of mood can be related to different uses of language (*Collins Cobuild English Grammar* 1995).

To examine discourse features and organisation of the e-mail messages, the study also adopted and adapted from researchers of computer-mediated communication, Gains (1999) and Murray (1988). The data was examined for discourse features in the light of the following aspects:

- (i) openings and closings (Gains 1999)
- (ii) paralinguistic cues (Murray 1988)
- (iii) simplifications of language (Murray 1988)

Following Gains' (1999) approach, the study looked at openings and closings of e-mail texts in terms of the variety of opening and closing salutations or greetings employed by message senders. In addition, the researcher added two other discourse features of e-mail messages for analysis namely opening statements and closing statements as it was felt that analysing only the salutations in the messages was inadequate.

The data was also examined for paralinguistic cues which Murray (1988) revealed in her study, for instance multiple vowels to represent intonation contours like "soooo", multiple punctuation marks like "well how did things go yesterday????".

The researcher further attempted to identify simplifications of language stated by Murray (1988) and Angell & Heslop (1994) in e-mail communication such as abbreviations and syntactic simplification.

Findings

In discussing findings, percentages are not provided at times in this article. Some messages have more than one occurrence of a certain feature, and thus, it would not be accurate to give the percentages. Instead, the number of instances a particular feature occurs is stated to support findings.

Findings are discussed in relation to the following research questions of the study:

- **What are the recurrent grammatical features of the e-mail discourse and their functions in the local business community?**
- **How does communicating using the electronic mail system influence the language forms in the e-mail discourse of the community?**
- **What are the differences between language in the e-mail communication of the community and language in conventional business writing?**

1. What are the recurrent grammatical features of the e-mail discourse and their functions in the local business community?

It is found that clauses in the imperative and declarative mood are recurrent grammatical features in the e-mail discourse of the selected community. Clauses in the imperative mood occur in 105 instances while clauses in the declarative mood occur in 94 instances. On the other hand, clauses in the interrogative mood are not as high in frequency of occurrence in the e-mail discourse of the community. This

seems to show that while e-mail communication of the community appears to be largely used for requesting and for informing, it is used less for inquiring.

As the e-mail medium is often used for "quick communication" (Angell & Heslop 1994: 21), the form of expressing a request using "*please*" + *a verb* + *an object* is the most preferred imperative clause (39 instances) in the business community. This could be due to it being a concise form of expressing a request compared to other forms of request often used in conventional business writing such as "I would appreciate if you could". The use of the word "please" in addition to the basic imperative clause renders it a polite form of request appropriate for business communication, while at the same time, conveying firmness to recipients.

The data reveals that requests are also widely expressed through question forms (22 instances) beginning with the modal auxiliary "can" (12 instances). Requests using tentative expressions (5 instances) such as "Is it / Will it be possible to ...?", "do you think we can ...?" or "wonder whether you should ..." are used to ask special favours from recipients. The modal "may" is however rarely used in the e-mail messages, occurring in only one instance.

It is significant that the form of request using the auxiliary "do" occurs in 8 instances of the data. This could be attributed to the sense of urgency or appeal conveyed by the auxiliary "do", thus indicating that e-mail communication is also used to convey appeals in the selected community.

The data also yields two main types of clauses in the declarative mood namely those giving information (80 instances) and those conveying promises (14 instances). The tense form occurring the most frequently in clauses giving information is the simple present tense (30 instances). Since this tense indicates that information given in the e-mail messages holds over time or issues related were operative at the time messages were sent, its frequent occurrence in the data indicates that e-mail communication is largely used to transmit information on current matters in the community.

The second most frequently occurring tense form in the data is the present perfect tense (19 instances). This tense occurs mostly in opening statements of the e-mail messages, and clauses using verbs in this tense act as reference points for subsequent statements in the same messages. In some messages (4 instances), the present perfect tense is also used to convey senders' attempts at making other types of communication prior to sending the messages. Such cases indicate that e-mail communication in the community complements or acts as 'follow-ups' to other forms of communication like telephone calls or faxed messages.

In the corpus, the present continuous tense (10 instances) is used when message senders wish to inform recipients that other documents (usually in hard copy form) would be sent to them. Besides this, the present continuous is also used to inform recipients of concessions or incentives senders are offering to clients.

Besides giving information, the corpus also reveals the use of clauses conveying promises made by message senders. These clauses normally use the simple future or future continuous tense, with the auxiliary "*will*" or "*shall*". In this type of clauses, the auxiliary "will" (11 instances) is used more frequently compared to the auxiliary

"shall" (3 instances), perhaps because "will" can be used in relation to all kinds of personal pronouns, besides also indicating certainty.

Besides the predominance of the simple present, present perfect and present continuous tense forms of the verbs in clauses with the declarative mood in the data, it is also found that most of the verbs are in the active voice. Out of the total number of 91 clauses in the declarative mood, only 4 are in the passive voice. This could be due to the active voice being a more direct and a shorter form of language use, and thus is appropriate for the "quick communication" (Angell & Heslop 1994: 21) style of e-mail.

The data further reveals that subordinate clauses are fewer in number compared to main clauses (14 subordinate clauses, 212 main clauses). Thus, there are more sentences with just the main clause. This seems to reflect the "simple, straightforward" (King 1997: 11) style typical of current business communication.

Subordinate clauses in the data consist mainly of purpose and reason clauses. Purpose clauses (7 instances) accompanying main clauses in the imperative indicate that request statements sometimes have to be justified for, when they are made in e-mail communication of the community. Reason clauses (7 instances), on the other hand, are often used to convey reasons for suggestions, decisions as well as requests by members of this community.

2. How does communicating using the e-mail system influence the language forms in the e-mail discourse of the Malaysian business community?

The findings reveal that the e-mail system could have influenced the use of certain language forms in the e-mail discourse of the community.

In 7 instances of the data, senders use phrases like " *take note* ", " *make sure* " or a word like " *remember* " in expressing requests. This seems to be a deliberate move to emphasize to recipients the necessity to heed their request messages since a message that does not attract the recipient when s/he scans its "first screenful" (Angell & Heslop 1994: 20) often runs the risk of not getting read or of being deleted.

The quick communication style of the e-mail system could also have brought about the use of contractions like and " *Here's* ", " *I've* ", " *I'm* " and " *They're* " in 13 of the e-mail messages. According to Angell & Heslop (1994), a contraction also helps e-mail writers to achieve a warm, down-to-earth tone. Perhaps this is what writers of the e-mail messages with such contractions hope to achieve. However, the use of contractions is still low in frequency among the messages, probably because message senders in this particular community did not wish to convey too informal a tone in their e-mail communication as contractions do convey such a tone.

In addition, the nature of the e-mail system is seen to have influenced the openings and closings of messages examined. The corpus has 39 messages without any form of opening salutation, a phenomenon which could be due to message senders feeling that an opening salutation was not necessary since the e-mail system had already asked them to indicate whom the messages were for at the beginning before they

started typing contents of their messages. In many cases, the messages are also part of a 'chain communication' between recipients and senders.

Although few in number (2 instances), the data does reveal expressives like "oops" and "Oppppppps!" in e-mail communication between the executives and their colleagues. According to Murray (1988), such expressives exist in e-mail communication since the electronic medium cannot make use of communication channels like facial expression, volume of voice or tone. However, since there is no evidence of similar expressives in messages between the executives and their business partners or clients, it could be surmised that either the executives were more cautious and reserved in their e-mail communication with the latter, or the contents of their communication just did not warrant the need for using expressives. Moreover, it could be a cultural factor which has influenced this reserved style in e-mail communication among the Malaysian business executives as Malaysians are generally not known to be very expressive.

Abbreviations in the corpus include *Pls.*, *ASAP / asap*, *u / U*, *Rgds / rgds*, *TQ*, *TQVM*, *Tks*, *thks*, *PO*, *PC* and *cc*. The abbreviation "u" or its capitalised form "U" denoting the second person pronoun seems to be the most prevalent in the e-mail messages (19 instances). Writers of those messages address recipients directly; thus, the frequent use of the second person pronoun. The abbreviated form of the pronoun saves time and space in composing messages through the electronic medium; in doing so, an informal tone is also conveyed.

Among abbreviations to express thanks, "TQ" seems to be the most preferred (7 instances) among writers of messages in the corpus perhaps because it is the most familiar and the shortest form of expressing thanks compared to other abbreviations for the same purpose (TQVM: 2 instances, tks: 1, thks: 1). Here again, we see that language choice seems to have been influenced by the e-mail system.

Other forms of abbreviation like "pls" (for "please") and "asap" (for "as soon as possible") are found in e-mail messages expressing request (8 instances and 2 instances respectively). The abbreviation "PO" (1 instance) which means "purchase order" is familiar to the business community. The abbreviation "PC" for "personal computer" which appears in 4 messages shows the influence of the world of information technology. Another abbreviation, "cc" assumes a new implication, thus showing the influence of the e-mail system. This abbreviation in e-mail communication means sending a duplicate of the e-mail message to one or several other individuals through the e-mail system, and does not mean "carbon copy" as in the conventional sense in formal correspondence.

Besides its impact on the use of abbreviations, the quick communication style of e-mail communication has also influenced the choice of the modal auxiliary "can" (12 instances) over "could" (2 instances) in conveying requests. The modal "can" is used by executives in the community probably because "can" is shorter in spelling and is a more direct way of requesting (*Collins Cobuild*).

3. What are the differences between language in the e-mail communication of the Malaysian business community and language in conventional business writing?

One obvious difference between language in the e-mail communication of the community studied and language in conventional business writing is the frequent use of the form "*please*" + *a verb* + *an object* to express requests (39 instances). This form seems to be preferred by e-mail writers in the corpus compared to the form "I would appreciate if you could" (3 instances) often used in conventional business communication. Perhaps the former, "*please*" + *a verb* + *an object* is more direct and concise for the e-mail system.

In conventional business writing, the word "kindly" is often used in expressing requests as it is formal and polite (Treece 1994). However, the present corpus shows very little use of this word for requests (2 instances) as most of the e-mail messages use the word "please" (59 instances). This could be attributed to the formal implication of the word "kindly", that is not very appropriate in e-mail communication which usually encourages an "informal, conversational style of writing" (Angell & Heslop 1994: 56). If at all the word "kindly" was used in the e-mail communication, the formal connotation of the word was toned down by an exclamation mark at the end of the request statement, as in "Kindly follow up!" noted in one e-mail message.

Instead of using the word "Dear" to start opening salutations just as in conventional business writing, the data reveals frequent use of "*Hi*" or "*Hello*" (40 instances). This feature could have been used to avoid the air of formality which would have accompanied an opening salutation like "Dear Mr / Ms. ...". At times among interactants who are familiar with one another, "Hi" or "Hello" is even dropped from the salutation (11 instances). Using only the recipient's name is a more concise salutation but still serves its function of addressing the recipient in a personal way.

The findings also show that closing salutations commonly used in conventional business writing such as "Yours sincerely" or "Yours faithfully" seem to have been replaced by more concise expressions like "*Thanks*", "*Thank you*" or "*Regards*" (52 instances). Such a substitution confirms that e-mail communication at the workplace has a quick communication style which is less formal than conventional business communication.

E-mail messages in the data are however not totally devoid of conventional business writing expressions such as "*would / will appreciate if you could / can ...*" or its *passive form* "*will be very much appreciated*". At times (2 instances), such formulaic expressions borrowed from conventional business writing are shortened with the subject and copula deleted, perhaps to lessen the time spent in typing messages as well as to reduce formality of the expression.

Implications and Recommendations for English for Business Communication

The above conclusions have some implications for designing future teaching and learning materials related to English for Business Communication (EBC). In the syllabus for EBC in local tertiary institutions like the National University of Malaysia, e-mail communication for business contexts has yet to be introduced. The study has shown that e-mail communication complements other mediums of communication among members of this business community. Thus, there arises the question of whether elements of this type of communication should be incorporated into courses which aim to prepare tertiary students for workplace communication.

If e-mail communication is to be introduced to the EBC syllabus, it is hoped that the findings of this study have helped to shed some light on the type of grammatical forms and discourse features characteristic of e-mail communication in a Malaysian business community. Instructors and course designers could perhaps be enlightened on the types of language forms and functions to draw their students' attention to. Situations involving e-mail communication at the workplace could also be a rich source of setting tasks for learners to participate in e-mail discourse with business contexts.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

The study is based on the collection of e-mail messages from a single company. By developing a framework to investigate discourse features from e-mail communication in the selected business community, this small-scale study demonstrates an approach to analysing e-mail communication in the Malaysian business context. If the approach is applied to larger-scale studies, it may help to define the use of the medium and to develop appropriate pedagogic guidelines for EBC instructors. A similar research on e-mail communication in a different kind of business community could also verify the conclusions made here.

As this study has examined e-mail messages performing different communicative purposes, there is no definable genre for the messages. Since e-mail messages in the data carry out different communicative purposes in the business community they are found in, they do not belong to a single genre. Perhaps, future studies could focus on only a set of e-mail messages sharing a common communicative purpose to see whether there is any identifiable genre in those messages.

Conclusion

In summary, the study has revealed that e-mail messages of the selected community were mainly written for requesting and informing, using different types of grammatical structures. In addition, main clauses in the declarative mood are mostly found in the simple present tense. Other discourse features like opening salutation, opening statement, closing statement and closing salutation are also found in the e-mail messages although they are not compulsory for such a communication. The study also shows the influence of the e-mail system on the communication of a Malaysian business community.

It is hoped that the findings and conclusions have shed some light on the nature of e-mail communication in the Malaysian business community and at the workplace. Other researchers might want to consider taking up further investigation into this type of communication, in a different sort of business community, to confirm or dispute what has been revealed and concluded here. Ultimately, it is hoped that learners, instructors and course designers of EBC in particular, and of communication at the workplace in general, can benefit from such an endeavour.

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Biodata

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