

Formality and informality in electronic communication

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Abstract

Electronic mails have nowadays become the most usual support to exchange information in professional and academic environments. A lot of research on this topic to date has focused on the linguistic characteristics of electronic communication and on the formal and informal features and the orality involved in this form of communication. Most of the studies have referred to group-based asynchronous communication. But the increasing use of e-mails today, even for the most important, confidential and formal purposes is tending to form a new sub-genre of letter-writing. This paper studies the formulae of etiquette and protocol used in e-mails for salutation, opening, pre-closing and closing, and other elements related to formality and provides new insights on these features. Our research is based on the analysis of a corpus of formal and informal messages in an academic environment.

Introduction

In this paper we compare different linguistic features of e-mails in English on the basis of their mode of communication (one-to-one or one-to-many) and the sender's mother tongue (native or non-native).

The linguistic features analysed are:

- i) overall register of the message measured by the level of formality or informality of its opening and closing;
- ii) the use of contractions;
- iii) the number of politeness indicators per message;
- iv) the number of non-standard linguistic features per message.

Our initial hypotheses, based on previous research, were that: computer mediated communication (CMC) reflects the informalization of discourse (Fairclough, 1995) and that CMC is not homogeneous but is made up of a number of genres and sub-genres that carry over distinctive linguistic features of traditional of-line genres. The aim of the study is to corroborate the hypothesis and to determine whether the writer's first language impinges upon the register of the message.

Methodology

In order to study the degree of formality of e-mails an analysis was made of a corpus of e-mail messages exchanged by members of academic institutions on the topic of Erasmus exchange programs. 100 e-mail messages were analysed: 25 one-to-many native messages, 25 one-to-one native messages, 25 one-to-many non-native messages and 25 one-to-one non-native messages.

Results and Discussion

The overall register of the message was measured by assigning to its salutation and farewell values for formality along a continuum of 0 to 1 and by examining the number of steps involved in the farewell: that is if there a one step closing or a two step closing with a pre-closing of the type "I look forward to hearing from you". The results for the overall register of formality are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Overall register of formality			
	Salutation	Farewell	Steps
1-many native	1,0	0.41	1,12
1-1 native	0.51	0.53	1.08
1-many non-native	0.93	0.51	1.18
1-1 non-native	0.74	0.61	1.69

These results largely conform to our initial hypotheses, but with interesting variations. It is clear that, in one-to-many messages, the greetings are very formal (1, the highest possible score, for natives and 0.93 for non-natives). It would seem that here there is clear carry over from the traditional business letter and memorandum as Yates and Orlikowski (1992) argued. As regards one-to-one communication both native and non-native salutations are more informal: 0.51 for natives and 0.74 for non-natives. In one-to-one communication, non-native writers are more formal for all categories. The sharp asymmetry between the formality of salutations and farewells of native one-to-many e-mails (1.0 vs. 0.41) is striking. Although more research is needed in this area, a tentative explanation is that the formality of the sign-off is being transferred to the electronic signature.

The use of contractions is a clear marker of informality (Biber, 1988). Table 2 shows the results for contractions in the corpus analysed:

Table 2.

	Possible contractions	Full forms	Contractions
1-to-many native	116	115 (99.13%)	1 (0.87%)
1-to-1 native	111	109 (98.19%)	2 (1.81%)
1-to-many non native	47	42 (89.36%)	5 (10.64%)
1-to-1 non-native	79	72 (91.13%)	7 (8.87%)

The analysis of the corpus surprisingly revealed a very low percentage of contractions in native e-mails (0.87% and 1.81%). Contractions were more frequent in non-native e-mails (10.64% and 8.87%). The greater use of contractions by non-native participants may reflect real stylistic differences for this formality marker.

Measures of politeness indicators have been obtained by counting the number of expressions of gratitude and pragmatic, routine formulae used in the mails:

Table 3.

Politeness indicators per message	
1-to-many native	3.22
1-to-1 native	2.28
1-to-many non native	1.09
1-to-1 non-native	1.31

As shown in the table native e-mails contain the highest number of politeness indicators per message. Again native speakers write considerably more formally than non-native speakers.

The results of the number of non-standard linguistic features per message are as follows:

Table 4.

Non-standard linguistic features per message			
	Misspellings	Non standard grammar/ spelling	Paralinguistic cues/ emoticons
1-to-many native	0.11	0.06	0.17
1-to-1 native	0.28	0.04	0.04
1-to-many non-native	0.32	0.23	0.55
1-to-1 non-native	0.08	0.12	0.50

The low number of errors per message is striking; it is probably because writers are aware that they represent their institutions. The lowest number is in non-native speakers. Non-native speakers may be more concerned about the idea of showing their accuracy in English.

The scores for non-standard grammar and spelling are very low. In these subgenres of CMC, the grammatical norms of formal letters seem to be firmly in place. Non-native speakers use paralinguistic cues and emoticons more, probably because it is easier for them to use these resources to be creative.

Although these mails show a very formal style of writing, we can observe a slight move towards the use of the new CMC linguistic features to communicate more expressively.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the results tend to suggest that there are significant stylistic and pragmatic differences between e-mails that can be established on the basis of their mode of communication, with one-to-many emails tending to be more formal and one-one emails incorporating more informal features. In addition, the results of the corpus analysed seem to indicate that, within International Standard English (McArthur 1998), stylistic and pragmatic features may be a significant parameter delimiting native and non-native varieties.

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