Business e-mail communication: some emerging tendencies in register

Julio C. Gimenez *

21 Denmark Road, Reading, RG1 5PA, UK

Abstract

The present paper attempts to investigate whether the spoken nature of e-mail messages has already started to affect business written communication. It looks at the register and context of the language and at the style used in commercial electronic mail. Sixty three business e-mail messages are analysed and later compared with forty business letters from the same company. From the analysis there emerges some evidence to suggest that electronically mediated communication is already affecting business written communication, showing a tendency towards a more flexible register. This paper also considers some of the implications that this emerging tendency in interpersonal business communication may have for materials writers, business English course designers and teachers of written communication. © 2000 The American University. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The latest research on written business communication has called attention to the need for further investigation into the effects that new technological developments such as the fax and e-mail can have on written interpersonal communication (Barbara et al., 1996; Eustace, 1996; Gains, 1999; Louhiala-Salminen, 1996), stressing the fact that little, if anything, on the topic is mentioned in either coursebooks or specialised journals. A survey of eleven well-known ELT textbooks (Brieger & Comfort, 1992; Brown & Allison, 1991; Bruce

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 0118 9869672
E-mail address: lip96cg@reading.ac.uk (J.C. Gimenez).

0889-4906/00/$20.00 © 2000 The American University. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.
PH: 0889-4906(98)00030-1
et al., 1992; Gains et al., 1996; Hollet, 1991; Hollet 1994; Jones & Alexander, 1989; Minkoff, 1994; Seal, 1997; Soars & Soars, 1996; Swales & Feak, 1994) and three specialised journals (Applied Linguistics Vols 12–16, ESP Journal Vols 10–14, English Today Vols 7–11) provide direct support for such a claim. Only two of the surveyed textbooks deal with e-mail messages (Jones & Alexander, 1989; Swales & Feak, 1994), and only one of the journals includes articles on the topic (English Today).

To investigate whether electronically-mediated communication has already started to affect business interpersonal written communication, it is necessary to analyse those changes as reflected in the language and style used in commercial e-mails. It would be also worth considering whether we are witnessing the emergence of a new kind of discourse. The answers to these questions will have significance for the teaching of written communication in ESP.

The present paper thus attempts to investigate (a) whether the conversational nature of e-mail communication has already started to affect business written communication as reflected in the language and style of commercial e-mails, and (b) whether these e-mails contain sufficient substantive features which would make up an “independent (electronic) discourse” worthy of being considered a genre in its own right. Finally, the present paper discusses some implications for the teaching of ESP in the light of the results obtained.

2. The origins of e-mail

E-mail as a mode of communication can be said to have derived from telephone communication and as such it resembles the features of spoken rather than written language.

Brown and Yule (1983:7) point out that the spoken language is mainly characterised by short, usually fragmentary utterances, a great deal of repetition, the use of non-specific references, and the absence of conceptual density.

Similarly, Bygate (1987:16) states that “oral language tends to be more ‘spread out’ and less dense than written language”. He also refers to the factors that affect the production of the spoken language such as “time limitations” and “planning under pressure” which also determine its nature.

Ochs (1983:140–154) refers to four characterising features of unplanned spoken discourse which distinguish it from planned written discourse:

- the speaker’s reliance on the “immediate context to express propositions” (p. 140). This refers to the fact that in unplanned spoken discourse speakers depend more on the immediate context than on syntax to express semantic relations. Context is then used to link referents to their predications and propositions to other propositions.
- the speaker’s reliance on “morphosyntactic structures acquired in the early stage of language development” (p. 146). Thus, in unplanned spoken language speakers
rely heavily on demonstrative modifiers rather than definite articles, simpler determiners plus noun constructions rather than relative clauses, active verb forms rather than passive verb forms, and the present tense in relating past events. • the speaker’s tendency to “repeat and replace lexical items in the expression of a proposition” (p. 149). • “the form and content of sequentially arranged social acts tend to be more similar” (p. 151). This refers to the fact that morphological, syntactic or phonological features appearing in one utterance may be used again in another or other utterances.

The language used in e-mail communication shows most of the above mentioned features. Bachman and Palmer (1996:75) suggest that “engaging in an electronic discussion probably has more in common with an oral conversation than with reading…” As The Economist (1996:37) summarises it: “Electronic mail has created another novelty: the written conversation”. The fact that e-mails have to be written to be transmitted is a feature that reflects their mode of representation rather than their nature. In other words, e-mails combine features of spoken discourse (its nature) with those of written discourse (its representation) to be transmitted or received by a computer.

As shown in Fig. 1, the language and style of personal and, to a certain extent, academic e-mail messages show greater similarity to unplanned spoken discourse than to planned written discourse although it would be rather radical to say that e-mail messages are entirely unplanned. Ochs (1983:133) reminds us that:

Most of the discourse we encounter in the course of day-to-day communications falls at neither extreme.

Fig. 1 also shows some of the most relevant differences between e-mail messages and telexes, even if these modes of communication have sometimes been considered similar discourses (Jones & Alexander, 1989). However, the differences outlined in Fig. 1 seem to support the idea that e-mail and telexes have evolved from different sources and thus are composed of features that belong to different discourses.

3. Towards an analysis of “electronic discourse”: the register, style and contextual aspects of e-mail messages

This section will examine examples from 63 business e-mail messages¹ to try and find out if the features found in personal and academic e-mail communication mentioned above are also present in commercial electronic mail.

¹ Names and references to the company donor of e-mails or to the e-mail senders have been deleted to preserve confidentiality. All original typographical or language choices made by the senders have nonetheless been retained.
The e-mails that form the data used in this study were all sent to and from an import-export company based in the U.K., to and from customers around the world and were randomly printed out by the Export Manager of that company for this study. All of them were used for external distribution (the company does not use e-mail for internal communication), most of them have an informative purpose (either requesting or giving information), and some of them were sent to other recipients apart from the company donor (multiple distribution). The sample, though limited in size, represents some of the most frequent uses of e-mail communication in this particular company. It is not, however, meant as a representative sample of business settings in general.

The purpose and business relationship between sender and recipient of these e-mails deserve some consideration. First, most of the e-mails analysed for the present study (51 out of 63) were sent to either request or provide information about prices or availability of products (see Table 1). It seems logical to conclude then that this company and its existing customers find e-mail an appropriate
medium to fulfil such a communication need. Secondly, as will be discussed in
detail below, e-mail communications where an established relationship exists
between company and customer tended to display the most evidence of a
personalised register.

For the purpose of the present paper, three distinctive features of e-mail
messages will be referred to, namely, the register, style and contextual aspects.
Where appropriate, e-mail examples will be compared with those taken from forty
letters provided by the same company. The letters were also sent to and received
from customers around the world who did not have "an e-mail or a fax or who
considered that an e-mail was too informal for the occasion", or when
"confidentiality" and/or "legality" were an issue, according to the Exports
manager of the company.

4. The register of e-mail language

The language of e-mail messages, as asserted in Fig. 1, contains simple,
straightforward syntactic structures, showing a preference for co-ordinated rather
than subordinated ideas. It also shows a liking for short sentences over long
elaborate ones. In the commercial e-mails analysed, this is illustrated by examples
such as:

\textit{e-m19}: Pls provide us with your address in the UK. We may visit you next month.

e-m22: Please send me C.I.F.\ldots (place) \textit{prices for}\ldots (band + model). \textit{Also your}
other stocks with details.\textit{

\textit{e-m1}: Were now looking for\ldots (brand) copiers and spare parts. Pls. e-mail me
your\ldots (brand) inventory.\textit{
Another example of the type of language used in e-mail messages is provided by:

*e-m29: Pls. dont include the shipping costs. I can arrange that with my agent.*

in which the reliance on the immediate context is realised by unstated proposition relationships (Ochs, 1983) e.g. "because I can arrange that with my agent". Next, examples such as:

*e-m3: I will keep this hard disk in my drawer for a few weeks in case it is needed.*

account for the fact that demonstrative modifiers rather than definite articles are preferred in e-mail language. Similarly, the use of cleft structures/existential "there" as a way of drawing the reader into the topic is illustrated by examples such as:

*e-m54: What I need you to do is to inform your agent in...(place) about the L/C shift.*

*e-m61: And then theres this problem of the voltage and the Hz of the machines.*

Finally, elliptical forms provide further evidence that supports the idea that e-mail language reflects unplanned spoken discourse as in:

*e-m73: if interested, notify us accordingly,*

as opposed to more elaborate forms used in business letters:

*lett-35: I would appreciate if you let me know at your earliest convenience*

*lett-12: Should you have any other query, please do not hesitate to let me know.*

It should be noted, however, that the type of language described in this section was more frequent in e-mails sent by customers who had already established a business/correspondence relationship with the company than in those which requested information for the first time.

5. E-mail style

Unconventional abbreviations illustrate the fact that, as mentioned above, the style of e-mail messages is informal and personalised, even in most of the
commercial e-mails in the data. This is exemplified, for instance, by the use of the sender's first name initials followed by his/her last name or his/her first name alone at the end of the message instead of his/her full name as is commonly the case in more formal written genres such as letters.

*e-m9*: A. R... (last name).

*e-m30*: Roy

*e-m39*: Tony

Further, many abbreviations found in e-mail messages which comprise the data sample of this paper do not normally follow established norms. However, as more guidelines for composing e-mails become available to users, there will be more standard abbreviations in e-mails. The use of personalised abbreviations can be illustrated by the following examples:

*e-m35*: tks (thanks)

*e-m10*: rgds (regards-s)

*e-m63*: plse (please)

*e-m40*: pls (please)

*e-m59*: ...for your fax dt. 21st Jan. 98.

Contracted forms, so common in personal or academic e-mail messages and quite rare in formal letters, also indicate the informality in the e-mail style and provide evidence of the stylistic similarities between electronic mail and spoken
unplanned discourse. Although more restricted in use in commercial e-mails, contractions also appear in the data:

*e-m18: We're looking for prices...*

*e-m19: I'm sure that you can offer...*

*e-m55: doesn't affect any of the software on the machine.*

Next, the choice of informal lexical items is part of the same stylistic pattern. In this respect, we can also refer to certain colloquial expressions such as:

*e-m4: Frankly speaking,*

*e-m37: Just give us an e-mail*

*e-m7: Just drop me an e-mail*

and to the use of “complex lexical repetition” (Hoey, 1991:55) used in the same line:

*e-m42: the presentation will be presented by...*

These are features which are basically more closely associated with informal, unplanned discourse than with formal, planned written discourse. It is worth noting that these last two aspects are quite acceptable in e-mail messages whereas they would be considered “poor” style in formal written discourse. The Economist (1996:37) even suggests that “the Internet will collapse if you use flowery language” and “The five-word sentence doesn’t rattle on the screen as much as it does on paper”.

Punctuation, capitalisation and spelling are also worthy of some consideration, although two of the “guides to effective e-mail” (Hauten-Kemp, 1998; Sherwood, 1996) on Web pages seem to agree with the claim: “Don’t get caught up in grammar and punctuation”. Here are some examples from the data:
e-m15: i would like to confirm...

e-m38: no guarantee that that unit can pass copy is given or implied

e-m31: I analised the situation and

e-m34: If you have any questions please contact our Customer Service department.

Finally, the different ways of addressing the recipient/s of the message available to the "e-mailer", ranging from no salutation to the more conservative "Dear Sir" as in

e-m12: (no salutation)

e-m11: Hello from... (name of company)

e-m4: Dear Mr... (last name)

e-m20: Dear... (first name)

e-m56: Dear Sir

also indicate a more relaxed style when compared with the more rigid one in formal commercial letters. These examples also imply that an e-mail message can be sent to a wide audience and its reply can reach many people. Loughlin (N. D.) quoted in Cumming (1995:5) suggests that one of the positive side effects that computer-mediated communications has had on people is
This also points to the fact that e-mail messages are generally considered less confidential\footnote{For a different point of view see Le Vasan (1995).} than business letters and advice given to e-mail users usually makes it clear that e-mail messages

[...] should not be considered private. Confidential information should not be sent by e-mail. (Computer Services, The University of Reading, 1996).

In a similar study, Gains (1999) reports opposite findings. Most of the e-mails in his data followed the standard conventions adopted in formal business communication and only very few of them included features which reflected those in conversational discourse. However, this may be accounted for by the fact that many e-mails in the company he researched could "have a permanent legal status" (p. 90). As he clearly explains:

They [e-mails] provide a unified permanent record of internal communications within the company, and they become a dated legal record of such communications whether they refer directly to specific insurance policies or policy holders. (p. 97).

There are some limiting factors about the data used for the present study. Most of the e-mails were sent to the same recipient and not all senders are native speakers of English. These two factors may have produced the mismatch in the findings of the two reports in relation to the language and style of both sets of data. Besides, the background factors pertinent to this study and the inherent formality of the function of the message in most of the e-mails in Gains' study may have determined the differing levels of informality.

6. E-mail contextual aspects

Certain contextual features, such as the fact that a message can be sent on a Sunday, if culturally appropriate, for instance, also seem to point to the fact that e-mail messages are more informal compared to other written forms of communication. A formal letter, even if written on a Sunday, would very rarely be dated on such a day.
Closely associated with the date, the time at which an e-mail was sent seems to give some support to the previous observation. These two points add to the feeling of "lack of privacy" some e-mailers seem to experience. The receiver has direct access to not only the date but also the time when the message was composed. Some examples of what may be considered "atypical" of commercial correspondence practice are given below:

*e-m26: Sent: 26 October 1997 10:26 (Sunday)*

*e-m2: Sent: 23 February 1998 23:32 (Time)*

7. **A comparison of style and register between business e-mails and letters**

As a way of summarising the arguments presented in the previous sections, 40 letters and 40 randomly selected e-mail messages (out of the already quoted 63 business e-mails) were analysed following the basic characteristics of both written and spoken discourse presented in Fig. 1. It was found that the business letters analysed contain more than twice as many elaborate syntactic structures to "express propositions" than the commercial e-mail messages, twice as many complete sentences than e-mail messages and no elliptical or contracted forms. The business e-mail samples, on the other hand, contain almost three times the amount of simple, straightforward syntactic structures in the letters and up to 30 elliptical forms and 45 contracted forms (see Table 2).

These features can be illustrated by examples such as:

- **Syntactic structures:**
  
  *e-m43: If you are interested in listing copiers on our auction site...*  
  *e-m33: Pls e-mail us your...(brand) inventory and price lists.*  
  *lett-19: You may, therefore, like to consider application for membership in order to enable us to put your company forward to our clients when they request from us referrals of Service Providers in your field.*  
  *lett-40: We would appreciate your letting us know which models of used (brands) copiers you can make available, as also the quantities and unit prices thereof.*

- **Elliptical forms:**  
  *e-m16: If looking for suppliers or buyers in...(list of countries)*  
  *e-m15: Do not send containers as indicated on your fax of November 20.*
Table 2
A comparison of the units of meaning in business letters and business e-mails

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Business letters</th>
<th>Business e-mails</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elaborate syntactic structures</td>
<td>111 (73.6%)</td>
<td>49 (32.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple straightforward syntactic structures</td>
<td>41 (26.4%)</td>
<td>103 (67.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliptical forms</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>30 (19.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracted forms</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>45 (29.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 152 syntactic structures in each group.

(also see e-m13 above)

- Contracted forms:

  *e-m4*: ...we don't see that you can get a better price for 1025 (brand) toner.
  *e-m32*: ...won't be able to concentrate on anything else until he gets this problem solved.

(also see e-mails 18, 19 and 55 above)

It is also worth noting that most of the letters which were analysed for the present study (33 out of 40) were sent by customers who were writing to the company for the first time. As mentioned above in relation to e-mails, the business relationship between the sender of the letter and its recipient also seems to determine the medium and the senders stylistic preferences.

8. Implications for teaching

Further research in the field of electronically-mediated business communication is still required. However, from the data available in this paper, some implications for ESP teaching can be made in relation to electronic mail which seems to have already started affecting written interpersonal business communication.

First, considering the job market, job seekers will be requested not only to know how to send e-mail messages, that is the mechanics of composing a message, but also the conventions dictated by this new "electronic discourse". Thus, ESP teachers will need to train business students not only in understanding features such as "ellipsis", "co-ordination", and even the absence of it between propositions, and "personal abbreviations", but also in knowing when the use of these features is appropriate.

The data used in this study seems to suggest that the purpose and the relationship between the sender and the recipient of a business communication event determine not only the style of such an event but also its medium. Many customers of the donor company initiated their first contact with the company via a formal business letter but preferred a more informal medium to continue their communications. This finding seems to sit well with those made by Charles (1996: 33):
[...] as in any social interaction, there is in business interactions a progression from the status-bound behaviour of new relationships to the freer role enactment of the casual encounters between old friends.

ESP trainers can use authentic e-mail messages and business letters and, together with their students, analyse them following a framework for analysis such as the one suggested by Gains (1999). In business English classes, job-experienced learners can bring their company’s e-mail messages and letters, provided they are made available, and analyse not only their features to discover either prevailing norms or emerging patterns but also the preferred medium according to the purpose and the relationship between the sender and the recipient.

If e-mail communication continues to affect interpersonal business communication, the changes will have to be supported by new developments in the field of teaching materials. Writers will not only have to take into account the emerging conventions in business e-mail communication in future training or study materials but also new mediums for their presentation. Materials which allow for learners’ hands-on experience will have to be considered if learners are to fully experience the effects of e-mail on written communication (Le Vasan, 1995).

Finally, business course designers as well as teachers of written communication may need to take into consideration that business e-mail communication seems to be growing more dependent upon features such as flexibility, informality and efficiency. This, in turn, presents a challenge to the long-established tradition of teaching “formulaic writing” to business students (Le Vasan, 1995). On-line composition of e-mail messages may become a crucial issue in teaching written business communication.

9. Conclusion

The present paper has explored in an illustrative rather than exhaustive manner the language and style of e-mails as a means of communication. The data used is too small, however, to make any firm generalisations or to conclude that business e-mail communication represents a new genre as described by Swales (1990). Besides, even if the e-mails analysed in this paper can be said to exemplify the use of e-mails in business, they were all taken from the same source and mostly sent to the same receiver, thus not allowing for a more exhaustive cross-sectional analysis of business e-mail practices.

However, from the analysis of the samples and the references which have provided the bases for the present paper, some evidence emerges that the spoken nature of e-mails has started to affect the discursive practices in the context of interpersonal communication, making it more informal and personalised in many respects. Efficiency, one of the features of e-mail messages frequently mentioned
by e-mail users, seems to equate with informal and flexibility of style, a fact that is
supported by the absence of manuals that establish the norms for the composition
of messages.

The above claim, which is more representative of personal and academic e-
mails, also seems to apply, though to a lesser extent, to most of the commercial e-
mails analysed in the present study. However, it should also be noted that the
level of informality, and flexibility of style is greater in personal than in
commercial e-mails and dependent on the relationship already established between
sender and recipient of the message. Fig. 2 illustrates the range of flexibility
between personal e-mails on one hand and legal documents on the other.

The language and style of e-mail messages seem to indicate that this emerging
electronic discourse reflects the features of spoken discourse from which it has
derived. The fact that e-mail as a means of communication was made available
world-wide in the early 90s and that e-mail messages depend on the written
medium for their representation and transmission might however influence the
pace at which this tendency will fully develop.

**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Pauline C. Robinson for her comments on earlier drafts of this
paper and to Z. S. S. Exports Manager of the company donor, for his generous
donation and comments. Thanks are also due to A. Dudley Evans and the two
anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

**References**

Hall International.

Julio C. Gimenez is an ESP instructor at Universidad Empresarial Siglo 21 in Cordoba, Argentina. He holds an M.A. in TEFL from CALS-Centre for Applied Language Studies at the University of Reading, U.K., where he is now working towards a Ph.D.