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What makes e-mail communication effective? A discourse analysis in an international business sector

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Abstract

E-mail has become widely used as the overwhelmingly preferred medium of choice in international business communication where English works as business lingua franca. It is argued that e-mail messages are often not as 'formal' as business letters; they closely resemble features of the spoken discourse. This paper examines the discourse features of e-mail messages used in the Ready-made Garments (RMG) sector in Bangladesh, the third largest garments exporter in the world. The paper investigates the components, stylistic features and registers of syntax, lexis and semantics as used in these e-mail messages.

Data is drawn from 92 e-mail messages from five RMG business organisations in Bangladesh in this mixed method study. E-mails were sent to and from RMG personnel in Bangladesh, India, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Belgium and the United Kingdom. Analysis reveals that stylistically, the components of e-mail messages are generally personalised and informal. The findings also disclose a wide range of discourse features of e-mail messages unique to the specific genre of communication such as using vernacular grammar, personalised punctuation often based on implicit acceptance of common knowledge, words omissions and abbreviations. The stylistic features and register of language used in e-mail messages illustrate a hybrid form of speaking and writing discourses. This paper has implications which may contribute to course design, materials development and pedagogy for Business English and Business communication courses in general and ESP in particular.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, internet based e-mail communication had an unprecedented impact on business communication. E-mail has become a powerful business communication tool (Guffey, 2010; Lan, 2000; Rice, 1995) [1] [2] [3] and genre. The advancement of communication technology, especially computer and internet technology, throughout the society has brought a great revolution and profound changes in today's workplace communication particularly in the setting of business communication (Gains, 1999; Kirkgoz, 2010) [4] [5] where English is used as a business *lingua franca*. E-mail is now an essential (Munter, Rogers, & Rymer, 2003) [6], dominant (Kiang, 2003) [7] and also a preferred channel (Habil, 2010) [8] of communication at business workplace.

It is argued that Internet based e-mail communication which may be called 'technospeak' is radically changing or removing standard forms of English language use in formal business writing and replacing conversational forms of corresponding (Crystal, 2006) [9]. Scholars raised a question: Is the stylistic features of e-mail language a challenge to Standard English? Lan (2000) argues that e-mail language is not a threat to standard English. However, e-mail language has extended a variety of English language. Crystal (2006) notes: 'E-mail had extended the language's stylistic range in interesting and motivating ways. … it is an opportunity, not a threat, for language education' (p. 133). The aim of this study is to explore: a) in what ways e-mails affect the use of English as a business language; b) what might be implications to teaching English as a language of business.

2. Methodology

Data is drawn from 92 e-mail messages from five RMG business organisations in Bangladesh. E-mails were sent to and from 25 RMG personnel in Bangladesh, India, China, Honk Kong, Japan, Belgium and the United Kingdom. Data have been analysed following mixed method approach – combination of qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative data have been presented using simple statistical analysis such as frequency and percentage while qualitative data have been presented by giving examples from the original e-mail messages.

3. Findings

3.1 Stylistic features in the components of e-mail messages

In explaining e-mail message components, Guffey (2010) pointed out four parts: a) an informative subject line, b) an opening, c) a body and d) an appropriate closing. The following sections discuss different components and stylistic features of e-mail messages in the RMG sector.

3.1.1 Subject

Crystal (2006) argues that subject should be specific in an e-mail message. It is extremely important to write a functional subject line to give an idea about the message and its importance to the recipients (Munter et al., 2003). Among the e-mail messages in this study, most of the messages (86.96%) had subject in the subject line. However, it was quite difficult to sense the close relation between the subjects in subject line and their relationships with the function of a message always. Rather, the subjects are in general, for instance, a name or an issue of an order. It is also found that under one subject umbrella, a number of e-mails were exchanged. Some examples of sample subjects in subject line of e-mails messages are given below:

Table 1

SL	Examples
1	E-mails 1-8: *Fatigue sweater color standards*
2	E-mails 9-17: *S-3 Heavy knit capacity*
3	E-mails 50-56: *Regrading 9950 DROP IN item*
4	E-mail 40-45: *Prices and samples*

From the above subjects, especially from the first three subjects in the subject line, it was difficult to guess or to identify the function of the message. It is also difficult to find out the idea about the topic of discussion. Only e-mail related personnel may understand the subject written in such a way to some extent or by reading the whole mail message. The above kinds of subject writing indicates that e-mail messages are quite different from formal business letter writing in terms of style of subject writing and also in language use which is personalised and informal.

3.1.2 Opening greetings and salutations

Opening salutation/greeting is an important aspect in e-mail communication. Literature suggests beginning an email message with a proper greeting because it shows friendliness and indicates the beginning of the message (Guffey, 2010). Data show that about 17 types of salutations were used in sample e-mail messages as opening greetings which range from no salutation to more formal and more informal salutations. Data suggest that mostly used opening salutation was “Dear Mr [name]” (30.43%), followed by salutation “Dear [name]” which accounts 21.73%. In addition, 9.78% messages had “hi [name]” salutations, while 8.69% of the messages had no salutations. As such opening salutations in e-mail messages in the RMG sector indicate personalised and flexible nature of salutation use.

3.1.3 Closing

According to Hatch (1992), [10] the sender of an electronic message will have to generate a closing. Data reveals that closing sentences in e-mail messages were almost devoid of conventional business letters writing. Except three e-mail messages, all e-mail messages end either with informal closing sentences (56 instances) or with no closing sentence (31 instances). Such use of informal closing sentences indicates the adoption of a quick but informal communication style in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. Munter et al (2003) argues that although non-routine e-mail may have a conclusion but routine e-mails do not need it. As RMG personnel are involved in exchanging a number of routine e-mails everyday with their business counterparts, it is not necessary to write closing remarks in their regular and routine e-mails.

From the above discussion of language use in the different components of e-mail messages suggests that language of e-mail messages in the RMG business communication is not as formal as business letters. Rather over times, it has become quite flexible, informal, and personalised in nature. Yet it

does not impede in effective communication with business counterparts. Indeed, it has become a natural flow of language use which is mutually acceptable to both parties.
In addition, if we look at the overall the language use in e-mail messages, it is seen that e-mail texts are deeply influenced by spoken discourse which also informal, personalised, and dissimilar with formal business letter writing. The subsequent section discusses different features of spoken discourses which are found in e-mail texts in the RMG e-mail communication.

3.2. Features of spoken discourses in e-mail texts

Literature shows that there are differences between spoken and written language (Brown & Yule, 1983; Bygate, 1987; Gimenez, 2000) [11] [12][13]. According to Munter et al. (2003), conversational language includes personal pronouns, contractions, parenthetical asides, active voice, casual salutations. Gimenez (2000) notes that spoken language is usually simple, has straight forward syntactic structures, reference proposition, demonstrative modifiers and elliptical forms while written language has elaborate syntactic structures, subject-predicate constructions, use of definite articles and complete information units.
Despite differences in language use in spoken and written as suggested in literature, it was found that e-mail messages are very similar to spoken language. Following the features of spoken language by Cutting (2011) [14], the spoken features found in the RMG e-mail messages have been sorted out in the following table as per occurrences in email messages.

Table 2

SL	Types of colloquial expressions	Number of e-mails (%)	Examples
1	Using Abbreviations standard, nonstandard, and intra-official	71 (77.17)	Info, CMT, tektil,
2	Giving informal thanks	5 (5.43)	E-mail 20: Thanks for your cooperation.
3	Initial clausal ellipsis	20 (21.74)	E-mail 61: Noted. Waiting for your confirmation
4	Contraction	10 (10.87)	E-mail 21: We are worried with this order and don't want to waste time in no case.
5	Low initials	18 (19.56)	E-mail 56: do you already have an overview of the total in stock please?
6	Improper punctuation	34 (36.96)	E-mail 28: Day time I should work in factory …[one space, then two dots, no period at the end]
7	Informal expressions	5 (5.43)	E-mail 15: Hope you are fine.
8	Discourse Markers/ fillers	10 (10.87)	E-mail 22: By the way , Pls clear me final decide of 48/48 /4..
9	Sentence with dots		
10	Improper space in writing	4 (4.35)	E-mail 30: We are still working on it …[after space three dots]
11	Vague quantifier	1(1.09)	E-mail 25: He need [no s] to do lot of work for production.
12	Using short name	64 (69.56)	E-mail 8: Hi Mosharraf
13	Informal salutations	30 (32.61)	E-mail 28: Dear Boss
14	No punctuation	1 (1.09)	E-mail 45: Samples sent today
15	Capitalization	11 (11.96)	E-mail 75: ALSO NOTE FINAL ORDER QTY IS 9,300 YDS FOR THE STYLE.
16.	Word omission	35 (38.04)	E-mail 53: yes [I] understood
17.	Vernacular grammar/ Syntax	10 (10.87)	E-mail 36: You below mentioned delivery schedule is workable even it is tight.

The data presented in the table demonstrates that the language of e-mail communication is quite analogous to spoken language. Although in terms of genre, e-mail is written text but far from formal language as it used in formal business letters.

4. Discussions and conclusion

E-mail is a fast-paced medium of communication which has own unique convention of communication especially in business setting (Kiang, 2003). In examining the features of e-mail communication, it can be said that the linguistic choice and features in e-mail communication has brought a vast change. The practices of e-mail writing are not now in a fixed rule or a feature. It is advised not to fix the features of e-mail messages in any boundary or templates (Chan, 2012) [15]. The style of e-mail has become from formal to semiformal and informal which is reflected in the use of abbreviations, contractions, colloquial expressions, omission of words, using low initials, ellipsis and personalised use of punctuations, nonstandard and personalised opening and closing greetings, using vernacular grammar, nick names in addressing, informal expressions and thanks and using deixis. As such uses of linguistic features in e-mail communication indicates the reflections of spoken discourses. At the same time, these features are recorded in written like formal letters. Thus, the linguistic choices in e-mail messages have become a hybrid (Munter et al., 2003; Rowe, 2010) [16] product of both spoken and written discourses which has created a new and/or a modified genre of language use.

Interestingly, although senders use vernacular grammar, personalised punctuations and abbreviations, it does not work as a barrier to smooth progression of meaning in the context. The language used here are simple, helps to understand the messages. Additionally, the used short sentences have become a convention of e-mail messages. All together makes e-mail communication effective in RMG business settings.

The discourse analysis of e-mail messages may give a comprehensive picture about the features and practices of English language use in e-mail communication for international business context in general and in the RMG sector in particular. The findings may have a number of implications in knowledge production, making language policy, developing language syllabus and curriculum, in pedagogy and language research. This paper may be helpful for course and materials developers of business English and business communication courses. Course and materials developers can be aware of and be informed from the study about the practices of English language in the international and intercultural business e-mail communication, and accordingly they may design business English and business communication courses and also develop teaching and learning materials for the courses. This study could give deep understanding about the RMG workplace culture and communicative practices which may contribute to pedagogy. It also gives a picture of both individual e-mail style and also workplace trends and workplace e-mail communication. Therefore this study may have implications for workplace and ESP pedagogy, especially in written interpersonal business communication for understanding the features and style of e-mail language in the RMG sector where e-mail has influence on written communication.

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