Electronic Mail—A New Style of Communication or Just a New Medium?: An Investigation into the Text Features of E-mail

Jonathan Gains

Abstract—Communication by electronic mail has become increasingly commonplace and important in corporate and institutional environments, yet the possible emergence of new linguistic and stylistic conventions are neither well documented in academic research, nor widely covered in textbooks for students of English. This study examines a corpus of data of real e-mail examples drawn from two distinctly different environments: commercial and academic. The key text features of both sources are analysed separately under common headings to reveal any patterns of style and convention which are revealed. This analysis suggests that commercial e-mail messages in this data appear to follow the normal conventions for standard written business English. More notably, the data from academic sources indicates that some users may view the medium as a pseudo-conversational form of communication, conducted in extended time and with an absent interlocutor. In the discussion section, the question is posed as to whether either data source contains recognizably new genres of written communication. It is suggested that the commercial data examined does not contain new genres, but that the academic data may do so and that more tightly-targeted studies could reveal the text features of these genres. The paper concludes by promoting the approach to analysis taken in this study as a basis for future research into e-mail communication. © 1998 The American University. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

Introduction

Electronic mail as a means of communication has its roots in, and is now firmly established in, the international internet system developed in the world’s universities, and a great many individual users now have access to this system. However, the medium has become increasingly important for everyday communication within large institutions and commercial orga-
isations, many of which have developed their own in-house electronic mail systems both for national and intra-national communications (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996). As yet however, academic research has not caught up with its task of adequately defining the norms which govern the use of this new medium, and it has so far provided no clear answer to the question of whether a stylistic protocol exists for the writing of e-mail messages. This raises an issue which will not be pursued here, that, with the exception of Swales and Feak (1995), there is almost no guidance available in the textbooks for students of English for academic or special purposes (EAP/ESP) who wish to use this means of communication proficiently. The purpose of this study, is to attempt a limited investigation into the features of real examples of e-mail messages from both academic and commercial sources, which may yield some clues as to how people go about writing such messages, and for what purpose. To achieve this aim, the corpus of data will firstly be described, followed by a detailed analysis of the key text features of each data source under the following sub-headings: Subjects; Openings; Closings; Stylistic Register; Conversational Features; Compression, Abbreviation and Word Omission; Topic Reference; and, Awareness of Medium.

Data Source

The data used in this study consisted of 116 e-mail messages which were randomly printed from the recipients’ files with no criterial instructions for pre-selection. Sixty-two of the e-mails were sent by 29 writers to three employees of the Leeds area office of a large UK insurance company, and were received on a closed system for internal electronic mail known as CIST by its users. The remaining 54 e-mails were sent by 30 writers to four individuals (two academics, two postgraduate students) in different UK universities, who are all users of the standard internet-based system. The data therefore represents an interesting cross-section of e-mail messages sent by 59 different writers to seven individuals working in two distinctly different environments (although it is not presented as a representative sample of the use of such systems in commerce and academia in general). Where examples of the data are given below, all original typographical errors have been retained, but for reasons of anonymity, the name of the commercial system has been changed and personal names are indicated by: [****]. Due to the modest size of the corpus examined in this essay, a detailed statistical analysis has not been made, however a number of surface observations are given below, in order to present a clearer picture of the examples which were studied.

Distribution

Electronic mail systems easily permit the sender to distribute the message to either a single recipient, or to a wide number of readers. Table 1 shows a
marked difference in this pattern of distribution between the two sources of data, with far more commercial e-mail messages being distributed widely than is the case with academic messages, and vice-versa.

In terms of geographic distribution, the features of the two sources of data are less comparable since they utilise different e-mail systems. The insurance company’s CIST system interconnects all the regional offices, together with the head office. However, in the data studied, all messages were sent either inter-office within Leeds, or between Leeds and the head office. The system used in universities is an open system with global access and connectivity, and therefore even this small sample revealed a wide geographic spread for the origin of messages, both within the UK and overseas. Table 2 shows the different geographic distribution of the examples in the corpus.

Function

Following Ghadessy and Webster’s (1988) classification for the functions of business communications, the commercial e-mail examples were assigned the category labels of either: Informative, Request(ive), or Directive, and were further classified into those which initiate and those which Respond. The same analysis was applied to the e-mail examples from academic sources. The latter case included three examples of purely social communications without an obvious work-related purpose. These did not appear to initiate or respond to requests or directives, and have been classified as Informative/Initiate, as their purpose appeared to be the conveyance of

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Commercial (%)</th>
<th>Academic (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual recipient</td>
<td>20 (32)</td>
<td>45 (83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple distribution</td>
<td>42 (68)</td>
<td>9 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62 (100)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Commercial (%)</th>
<th>Academic (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inter-office</td>
<td>35 (56)</td>
<td>20 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With head office</td>
<td>27 (44)</td>
<td>24 (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62 (100)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 3
Function of Messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Informative (%)</th>
<th>Requests (%)</th>
<th>Directive (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Commercial</td>
<td>28 (45)</td>
<td>20 (32)</td>
<td>7 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiate</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
<td>5 (8)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respond</td>
<td>22 (41)</td>
<td>7 (13)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Academic</td>
<td>8 (15)</td>
<td>17 (31)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Following: Ghadessy and Webster, 1988: 115)

information of a social nature. The results of this classification of the data are shown in Table 3.

From the data, it may be inferred that in commercial use in this company, e-mail messages are heavily employed to disseminate information (45%) and to make requests (32%). Responses to requests, however, are relatively low at 8%. This may indicate that e-mail requests in this organisation often require a response, such as telephoning, which does not entail sending a further electronic message. They are also used to issue directives (11%), which might indicate that they play an important role in implementing the management policies of an organisation. In the samples from academic files, no such directives were found, with usage being concentrated on the transmission of information (41%—including social information), and in responding to prior requests (31%) where we might assume that the original request was for information itself; a task for which the medium of e-mail is ideally suited.

Text Features of Commercial E-mail

Subjects

The page header layout of the CIST e-mail system is clear and uncluttered and automatically generates a memo-style opening which consists of subheadings for: Date, To, From and, Subject (as noted by Hatch, 1992: 13). The subjects given in the data studied all related quite closely to the function of the message, and in general, were not used to grab attention or to make a personal statement. Some referenced examples are given below with the assigned function in parenthesis after the subject heading:

SS8: Subject: LBIS USEFUL INFO? (informative, initiate)
SS13: Subject: Young Disabled On Holiday (request, initiate)
SS27: Subject: Below Min Premium (request, respond)
SS44: Subject: Men’s toilet on 2nd floor (directive, initiate)
In the following two instances, the CIST system was used to organise the informal, and non-work related activity of a sweepstake. In both cases, the subject was declared openly in the header, although the subsequent information giving details of the sweepstakes was more indirectly presented (as discussed below in the section entitled, Stylistic Register):

- SS36: Subject: GRAND NATIONAL   (informative, initiate)
- SS56: Subject: Fantasy Cricket—W/E 29/3/96  (informative, initiate)

In the final example below, the message was written by an insurance consultant with the intention of putting on record the good work done by an employee in the administration department, to her superiors. The nature of this message is overtly flagged in the subject heading:

- SS46: Subject: Brill. Service   (informative, initiate)

### Openings

Of the 62 examples in this data, 57 (92%) used no opening greeting at all at the beginning of the message, which would seem to indicate a convention for use of this system that may have evolved from the very clear heading format and the large proportion of messages for multiple distribution. The remaining five messages (Table 4) use some form of opening device, but represent only 8% of the examples, and may indicate personal idiosyncrasies of style.

### Closings

Hatch (1992) notes that the sender of an electronic mail message “may or may not provide an additional opening, but will have to generate a closing” (p. 13). In the data from this commercial source, two particular methods of closing appear to evenly dominate the convention for signing-off this type of e-mail message. In 26 examples (42%) the sender’s name only is used to close the message, and in 25 examples (40%), some variation of ‘thank you’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style of Opening</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No greeting</td>
<td>57 (92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipient’s name</td>
<td>2 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear…</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi folks</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hello</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is employed. These figures correlate loosely with the number of information and request messages in the data (28 and 20, respectively), and suggest a link between information—name only, and request—thank you. Of the remaining examples, five (8%) contained no closing at all, and the other examples are largely used in messages sent to individuals. Table 5 shows the frequency of the closings used.

**Stylistic Register**

Whilst acknowledging Crystal and Davy’s (1969: 61) warnings about ambiguity on this topic, the choice of labels used here allies most closely to Couture’s (1986: 80) definition of linguistic registers. In general, the stylistic register employed by the writers of the commercial e-mail examples appeared to be largely consistent and may be characterised as using the semi-formal tone of co-operative business colleagues, as illustrated in the following extracts:

SS3: This is intended as a quick and easy reference point, displaying the up to date business figure for the account.
SS8: To achieve target it is important that all business is processed by the end of quarter deadline.
SS19: Following extensive negotiations I am pleased to advise you that a Special Deal has been agreed on our Guaranteed Bond.

Nearly all writers observed what may be described as the standard conventions for written business English, that is: fully-formed and correctly punctuated sentences which a normal speaker of British English would regard as “grammatical” in their written form. This uniformity of written style was breached in only three messages in the data. In these three cases (see below), the first person pronoun is either typed unconventionally in lower-case or omitted from sentence initial position altogether, both of which devices would seem to indicate the writers’ intent to convey a less formal tone to their messages or their use of the medium:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style of Closing</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sender’s name only</td>
<td>26 (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(many) thank(s) (you) etc.</td>
<td>25 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No closing</td>
<td>5 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind regards</td>
<td>2 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheers</td>
<td>2 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorry</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well done</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On occasion, the stylistic register appeared to have been raised to a more formal level than would be appropriate for dealing with external clients. This change in register might be linked to the status of the writer in the organisation, or alternatively, to the sensitive nature of the message’s content, such as when a mistake has been made, or a request has to be refused. When this change occurs, it is evidenced by the adoption of “stock” business phrases of a more formal nature, as illustrated in the following examples:

SS27: I’m afraid therefore that we cannot accommodate your request in this instance.
SS25: I am now filing this matter as completed.
SS51: Please accept my apologies for the inconvenience caused.

There are only three instances where the stylistic register is lowered from what appears to be the norm, and more informal and personal tone is adopted. Two examples are given below, followed by a synthesis of the apparent intent of the complete message in parenthesis:

SS13: So this is where you and I come in . . .
If we are lucky enough to win!!
IT IS FOR A VERY GOOD CAUSE—AND YOU NEVER KNOW, YOU MAY EVEN WIN!!!
(Promoting charity event)
SS18: Hi folks, . . .
Could you drop me a line by, say, Tuesday 2nd April.
(Requesting systems feedback)

A further change in register can be observed in directive edicts from the head of the Leeds office to subordinate members of staff, and in these cases, the tone may be described as authoritative or scolding. Of the following two examples, the first is a reprimand concerning the condition of the Gent’s toilet, and the second, a warning over “acceptable” business lunch expenses:

SS44: . . . the condition . . . is nothing less than disgusting . . .
. . . if I do not hear of major improvements . . .
. . .] until I discover the culprit for myself!
SS47: . . . my views on ‘reasonable’ expenses on entertaining.
. . . a potential . . . hazard as well as profligate spending.
Please be aware that I shall be monitoring this.

A stylistic anomaly is evident in the language used to promote the office sweepstake on the Grand National horse-race (mentioned earlier). In this case, although the message is circulated by a named individual at the head of the message, the passive voice is subsequently adopted which allows
“non-attribution of agency” (Brown and Yule, 1993: 17). This might be interpreted as an attempt by the individual concerned, to depersonalise their direct responsibility for the activity, or perhaps, a stylistic device designed to make the message seem more official and therefore “sanctioned”:

SS36: There will be a sweep.… …It will be held.…
Charge will be.… Prizes will be.…

Evidence that writers are “borrowing” a stylistic register from more established forms of written business communication, occurs when they refer to additional information which accompanies transmission of their own new message, for example: the re-transmission of a prior message, or the addition of a chart of computer generated figures. There appears to be a problem in developing a unified means of referring to this additional information, and the following examples show how the writers circumvent the problem by borrowing the language appropriate to hard copy data transfer, such as paper documents sent by surface mail:

SS25: Further to the attached.
SS35: Please find below new figures for…
SS38: I enclose the guide to completing the…

Conversational Features

In the data from this source, no evidence was found that writers were incorporating any features of conversational discourse into their texts. There are only three instances where the messages contained any language which approaches a conversational tone through the relaxation of the normal conventions of written English grammar (including examples SS13/18 above).

Compression, Abbreviation and Word Omission

In the case of data from both the commercial and the academic sources, compression and word omission were not found to be a prevalent feature of the texts, with the exception of the omission of pronouns from sentence initial position in a small number of examples (as noted in Zak and Dudley-Evans’ study of telexes, 1986: 63). Perhaps unsurprisingly, abbreviations occurred quite frequently in examples from the commercial e-mails, but were also observed in some strands of messages in the academic data. Swales (1990: 26) indicated that the use of abbreviations may be seen as evidence for the existence of specialised discourse communities, and this text feature might provide a fruitful line of enquiry in a larger-scale study of e-mails.
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Topic Reference

In general, each example in the data dealt with only one major topic, albeit at some length in certain cases. This topic was usually highlighted initially in the subject header, and subsequently flagged explicitly in the opening line of the message, as the following examples show:

SS17: This is for info only for FS—really to elaborate on . . .
SS30: Please note that [Co.****] have changed their head office address to
  ...
SS33: Following extensive negotiations, I am pleased to inform you that . . .

Where the message related to some prior correspondence or dispatch, then again this was overtly mentioned in the opening line:

SS23: I refer to previous cists between yourself and [***] about this . . .
SS52: Further to my attached memo on Annuity premium credit.

The only examples which did not follow this convention were those which appeared to comprise short responses (often only one line) to a prior request sent to a single recipient, and in these cases, the subjects given in the message header were very clearly referenced:

SS39: Subject: MC80s and Homeplans
As far as I am aware, we have never had a situation where . . .
SS45: Subject: REF: PERSONAL PENSION APPLICATIONS
So far, only Sheffield have sent any of these in to me— . . .

Awareness of Medium

The CIST system for internal electronic mail as used in this company's offices, is clearly an established and important means for daily communication. The noun “cist” has been adopted by the system's users to describe not only the medium but also the individual messages it conveys as the following examples show:

SS10: Please advise anybody without access to Cist who may . . .
SS23: I refer to previous cists between . . .
SS28: As mentioned in my CIST Thursday 21st, . . .
SS61: . . . reply to K.M. via CIST by 3.00 pm . .
SS37: Please can you cist me with any cases . . .

It is interesting to note in the last example that “cist” is also now used as a verb within the organisation, in the same way as “e-mail” or simply “mail” is used as a verb by users of the standard Internet system. What is not apparent from the data, is any linguistic expression of a sense of novelty or fun at being “on” the system, in the way that users of the Internet e-mail
system sometimes express their reactions to being “on-line” (see corresponding section on academic e-mails below). One donor of commercial data pointed out that messages on this company's system can have a permanent legal status within the framework of financial services legislation, particularly where they relate directly to client policies. This fact may have an influence over the functional way in which users of the system express, but only in work-related terms, their use of the system. It may also help to explain the apparent commonality of stylistic register which was observed in the data.

**Text Features of Academic E-mails**

**Subjects**

The format of the standard e-mail system which is used in universities and by many other large users, is similar to that of the CIST system in that it has the same automatically-generated block of sub-headings at the top. It appears slightly more confusing however, due to the lengthy e-mail addresses of sender and recipient which are included instead of real names. The system invites, but does not oblige, its users to enter something in the subject box as the message heading is constructed. Where the message is a reply, a default subject is created automatically which relates to the original message and which appears as “Re:__”. All the messages in this data included a subject heading, and when there is an obvious function for the message, this is usually referred to explicitly in the box:

- **LG1**: Subject: Re: Meeting (request, initiate)
- **CB12**: Subject: re: seminar expenses (request, respond)
- **GF8**: Subject: Ethical and Legal Issues (informative, initiate)

In addition to this predictable style of use, the data also contained examples of a much more creative use of the subject box, such as where it is used for attention-grabbing promotional purposes, or used for phatic purposes to overcome the sterility of the medium:

- **GJ1**: Subject: COFFEEEEEEEEEEEEE ! (informative, initiate)
- **GJ10**: Subject: bloody brilliant (informative, respond)
- **GF2**: Subject: poor excuses (request, respond)

In many examples, although there was some classifiable function to the message, the content was of a largely social nature and this presents the writer with a pragmatics problem as a personal letter would not normally be formalised by the inclusion of a subject heading. The following examples (all of which share the function label *informative, initiate*) show some of the many ways in which writers got around this difficulty:
Openings

Of the 54 examples in this sample, a majority (63%) used some form or other of opening greeting at the beginning of the message, although the highest frequency category was for no opening device at all, with 20 instances (37%). The most popular style of opening greeting that was used is the informal “Hi” with 11 instances; interesting because it is a form of greeting which is casual and often associated with telephone language. On the other hand, the more formal letter style of “Dear . . .” also occurred in nine examples. The full range of greetings used is shown in Table 6.

Closings

The styles chosen to close the e-mail messages in the academic part of the data sample, represent a very diversified spread of forms, and seem to be a fairly open area for personal expression, depending on the degree of formality of the message. Apart from the 13 messages which contained only the sender’s name as a closing device, and the five examples which used no device at all, the remaining forms have largely been grouped together into categories of common features in order to limit the potential length of the list. Table 7 shows this condensed list and indicates the largely informal and warm tone which most of the writers adopted when closing their messages.

The 12 examples listed as Others are all distinctly individual and personal forms of closings, and are almost all of an informal and friendly nature, as illustrated by the examples below:

CB11: Stay well
GJ2: Hope your week goes well
LG4: Hope to speak with you tomorrow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 6</th>
<th>Style of Opening</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No greeting</td>
<td>20 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi</td>
<td>11 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear . . .</td>
<td>9 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hello (. . .)</td>
<td>6 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipient's name only</td>
<td>5 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 7
Style of Closing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style of Closing</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sender’s name only</td>
<td>13 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(All the) best (wishes/ regards)</td>
<td>10 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Much) Love (and respect)</td>
<td>6 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No closing</td>
<td>5 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bye/Cheerio for now</td>
<td>4 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheers</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank(s) (you)</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>12 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the final closing devices employed, it is also of interest to note the informality of some of the final lines of the text in certain examples, particularly where these appear to end the message on an abrupt or open note which would not be appropriate in other written forms of communication:

CB9: Have a most excellent holiday and be good to one another.
GJ6: not that I just bought out Sara Lee or anything...
GF8: ... and do the discussion at some other time (but it’s only a suggestion)
LG8: ..., or might be looking for someone to rent to ...?

In the last two examples given above, the writers appear to invite further discussion or comment from the recipients of the messages, and this device may be interpreted through the approach of conversation analysis as examples where the writers are explicitly marking a transition relevance place, such as might occur in a face-to-face dialogue. A good deal of further evidence exists that some writers may view the medium of e-mail as a communicative offshoot of conversation, and this aspect will be more fully discussed in a subsequent section entitled, Conversational Features.

Register

In the case of the data samples drawn from academic environments, the search for commonalities of stylistic register proved to be a problematic exercise, due to the extremely wide diversity of registers adopted by the writers of these examples. Even within the files of a single data provider, there exist a range of styles from the formal (student to tutor) through the semi-formal (academic to academic) down to the informal (friend to friend), as the following extracts illustrate:

LG1: I am sorry to inform you both that I won’t be able to...
LG10: First, belated thanks for a very enjoyable and stimulating seminar...
LG21: If I haven’t bored the pants off you with my ravings, ...
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Although this problem indicates that the data which was studied cannot be treated as a single coherent corpus from the point of view of an analysis of register, it does provide a number of interesting examples of ways in which writers are using the medium creatively, and differently to the general style which was apparent in the analysis of commercial e-mail examples. These differences are examined more fully below.

Conversational Features

A number of writers appear to have adopted some of the discourse features of conversation and incorporated these into their written messages, as if they are conducting a conversation with an absent interlocutor. In the case of short message responses to preceding messages, the response can be analysed under the conventions of conversation analysis, with particular reference to the concept of adjacency pairs (Levinson, 1983: 303). Using this analysis, the response can appear to be an extended-time second pair-part response to a first pair-part question, as the following examples show:

GF3: yup it got through, fine and dandy. M
GF2: Thanks love, yes I feel in torture.
GJ3: YES, my birthday on the first!!!!!!!!

Gold (1991) studied answer machine talk in which she highlighted this type of one-sided conversation and she identified the linguistic features which callers used, as “dialogic devices, . . . utilised in an attempt to deal with the irony of the task” (p. 251). The following examples include elements which might be regarded as “dialogic devices” which have been underlined for clarity:

LG2: I didn’t write the code myself you see, . . .
LG16: Well, is it a good time to catch you, Sir?
LG21: Stop it! I hear you say.
So, on to more . . . . . . Yes, the PhD. Well, if I’m going to . . .

Levinson also notes that echo questions are used to initiate self-repair in conversation (1983: 341), and in the following extract, the writer can be seen to be responding to the imagined echo-questions of her absent interlocutor in order to confirm the implausible truth of her information:

LG21: . . . Islamic Mortmain (yes, that’s right!!)
. . . of the ELTU (yes, he got a PhD for that) . . .

The apparent interactiveness of the discourse as imagined by some writers, is evidenced by their use of rhetorical questions interwoven into the text, which might be assumed to have been included more for their phatic effect than in the hope of an immediate and considered response:
LG21: What do you think? Any mileage in any of this? Has it been done to
death? Would no-one be interested?
CB12: Now, where did I lose that expenses form?!

A specific type of question which occurs initially in the following two extracts,
is the “How are you?” question, which has been identified as occurring
as an opening sequence in telephone conversations between friends or
acquaintances (Levinson, 1983: 309; Hatch, 1992: 12):

GJ9: Hi there, how are you?
[at end] Yours feeling very cheerful (How are you?)
LG16: Dear [****].
How are you today?

The next two examples also seem to incorporate some of the linguistic
features of telephone discourse and answer machine talk, respectively

GF10: [final para'] Well that's all for now—I think.
[at end] Cheerio for now
LG6: Hi, here’s the e-mail address for [****] All the best. B.M.

Hatch (1992) identifies a number of ways in which a writer can make their
writing “sound and look more like oral language” (p. 246). One of these
devices is word selection, whereby the writer chooses words and phrases
that help to convey an oral quality to the text, as shown by the underlined
text in the following examples:

CB2: I need a little bio-blurb about you…
GJ11: Ta for the match report—what a cock up.
… what ever you can get but not those crappy sort they sell in Garages. Hope
this is no hassle— …
Main thing is no sweat man!
GJ4: Hello chuckie— just dashing for a lecture…
GF6: Having a whale of a time at the LSE, …

Hatch also notes that “unplanned talk is often delivered clause by clause”
and that “temporally ordered clauses are frequently connected with the
conjunction ‘and’” (1992: 243). An imitation of this type of spontaneous
discourse can be seen clearly in the following example:

GJ9: And Leeds won last night—and they're on the TV on Sunday and
for the first time for ages I have no work to do and can go to the pub at lunchtime—
…

A conversational tone can also be suggested by the choice of certain lexical
items such as “just”, which was investigated in 100,000-word examples of
oral and written language by Hulquist in 1985 (cited in Hatch, 1992: 269),
and which he found to occur four times more frequently in spoken than in
written discourse. The incidence of “just” in the following example helps to
explain its distinctly conversational tone, which is further suggested by other conversational devices in the text (underlined for clarity):

LG2: I didn't write the code myself *you see* …
   I just linked to a free computer …
   It's very easy to do though, …
   … and then you just …

The writer's inclusion of conversational devices such as “just”, “you see” or “though”, may be a deliberate face-saving strategy to mitigate for the apparent knowledge advantage which he holds over the recipient of the message in technical matters. By adopting this conversational tone, he is thereby able to display the distinctly anglo-Saxon pose of the “humble expert”, which does not threaten the professional face of the academic colleague to whom he is writing.

In contrast to the data from the commercial source where messages can have a permanent and sometimes legal status, the high incidence of conversational features in this data indicate that, in many cases, the writers do not seem to perceive the medium of electronic mail as a particularly permanent form of communication. Rather, it frequently appears to be used as a short-term medium for pseudo-conversational interaction, regardless of the fact that it can be stored, retrieved and printed, as with any information which is captured and processed by the computer.

**Topic Reference**

As so many of the examples in this data are responses to prior requests for information of some kind, a variety of techniques for referring back to previous topics were used by the writers. As already noted, the subject header often creates an automatic initial reference, and in some cases this is followed by further explicit references to the individual items in question:

LG7: Subject: Re: your mail
   Two quick answers.
   Re translation of examples, …
   Re deadline: …

LG3: Subject: Re: Bits & pieces from yesterday
   1. TVU e-mails: …
   2. Thanks for the information— …
   3. Summary sheets: …
   4. Many thanks for your work on …

In other cases, a single line message comprises a complete answer to a previous request, as if it were the response utterance in an extended-time conversational sequence:

LG17: Subject: Re: Library tour
   Yes, 12 noon on Friday 26 April is fine for me.
Several of the examples use a mixture of devices in one message to link the text back to a previous message, as in the following excerpt:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{LG18}: Subject: Re: your mail
  \hspace{1cm}… great to hear from you!
  \hspace{1cm}… Re a joint project, by all means.
  \hspace{1cm}[new para'] I don’t know any of the hotels on the list, but …
\end{itemize}

In terms of the linguistic conventions for topic reference, as with many other text features of the academic e-mail examples, it is difficult to discern any consistent patterns of style or convention which govern their composition. One pattern which does seem to hold true for most examples, is that the post-greeting, opening line is not a formulaic statement of the function of the message, as was observed in the previous analysis of commercial e-mails. Rather, it often represents either a statement of social pleasantry, or it begins to deal with the business of the message without further introduction, as the following extracts exemplify:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{GF5}: Lovely to hear from you. I'll try to arrange …
  \item \textbf{LG14}: Glad we've made contact at last. I would be happy to …
  \item \textbf{LG11}: The postmark date will be taken into account, …
  \item \textbf{CB3}: [****] would like you to pencil in your diary two possible …
\end{itemize}

\section*{Awareness of Medium}

In distinct contrast to users of the internal CIST system in a business environment, the users of the standard e-mail system appear to have a high degree of awareness of the medium which they are using to transmit their messages. This is shown by the relatively high incidence of explicit references to the medium within the messages themselves:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{GF5}: Hello [****]—and welcome to the wonders of email.
  \hspace{1cm}Just press ‘r’ and let me know!
  \item \textbf{GF10}: …—I need a 5 minute tutorial on mailing back articles—(messed up this morning).
  \item \textbf{CB10}: Let me have land mail address and …
  \hspace{1cm}Physical address is:
  \item \textbf{CB11}: This is really just to establish the e-mail link
\end{itemize}

Humour is also used as a device by some writers when they describe their (lack of) ability to use the system effectively or when they make a mistake which could otherwise have been corrected before transmission:
This phenomenon may again have parallels with the findings of Gold’s (1991) study of answering machine talk where she states that “Humor is often used by people in ironic or uncomfortable situations as a means of mitigating discomfort (or irony)” (p. 252). In other words, it may be that some senders of e-mails do not yet feel comfortable with either the technology of the medium, or with the lack of interlocutor feedback in a process which they regard as dialogic, and hence, they compensate with humorous comments.

The observations made about both sources of data samples will be discussed further in the following section, which will also consider the question of whether any classification of sections of the data will identify it as belonging to a distinct genre of communication.

**Summary and Discussion**

It has been seen that while the two sources of electronic mail data share some of the conventions for openings (perhaps because of the automatically-produced memo format), there are very few other points of coincidence under the sub-headings that were used in the preceding analysis. For this reason, the following discussion will treat each source of data separately in summarising the characteristics of usage and in considering the existence of new genres of written communication.

**Commercial E-mails**

From the analysis conducted earlier of the distribution patterns and text features of e-mail examples from the commercial CIST system, a reasonably clear (if not statistically valid) picture emerges as to the role that such messages play in this particular business. They appear to be an established form of everyday internal communication within the organisation, which offer the benefits of being instantaneous, efficient and easily distributable to one or many specific recipients. Furthermore, they provide a unified permanent record of internal communications within the company, and they become a dated legal record of such communications wherever they refer directly to specific insurance policies or policy holders. Messages appear to be heavily used to disseminate information within the organisation, and the system provides a simple route for the transference of data in what is notionally a “paper-based” business. Individuals use the CIST system for a variety of work-related purposes, for example: to inform, to request, to respond, to promote, to praise or scold, to direct, and occasionally to have fun. Perhaps notably, users of the system do not appear to use it for purely
social purposes, or to contribute to open debate or discussion of issues of importance to the company. This conflicts with Kiesler et al.’s (1984) prediction that the increased use of computer-mediated communications would encourage higher and more egalitarian levels of participation in an organisation (p.1125). The CIST messages in this sample contained a high proportion of requests, which may indicate that this is a popular forum for asking people to do something without the necessity of the elaborate rituals of social pleasantries and status observance that a telephone call or face-to-face interaction would demand. If this is in fact true, it would support an alternate prediction made by Kiesler et al., that such computer use would “reduce self-consciousness” in its users (1984: 1127).

In this limited case study within a single company, the linguistic conventions for writing e-mail messages appear to be reasonably stable and are largely consistent with the type of business English used between cooperating colleagues. Grammar and punctuation too are generally allied to what may be called standard written English. The format and frequent multiple-distribution of the messages appear to have dictated a convention which negates a personal or general salutation at the beginning of the message. Furthermore, a convention for closings may have emerged, which links “thank you” closings with request messages, and names-only closings with information messages.

The question remains as to whether or not the collection of messages which was studied contained any recognisable and new genres of written communication. Following Swales (1990: 24–27), the company in question clearly forms a group which can be labelled as a discourse community, since it displays all six characteristics defined as necessary for membership. Beyond this however, for the messages in this data to be regarded as a genre they must meet the overriding criterion of a shared communicative purpose, rather than just similarities of form (Swales, 1990: 46). Applying this criterion, together with the evidence about subjects, functions and stylistic register given earlier, we cannot classify all the examples of messages as sharing a common communicative purpose since they are clearly designed to fulfil a disparate range of objectives. The fact that the messages share the same medium of communication and are written in a broadly similar convention does not qualify them as a group of communicative events of the same type, just as business letters are a subset of another class of communication methods and do not in themselves assume the status of a genre (as highlighted by Swales, 1990: 61).

Louhiala-Salminen (1996) has put forward a sensible argument for the existence of “business letters” and “business faxes” as representing “overarching pre-genres under which more specific genres…operate” (p.49), and this position might reasonably be extended to the concept of “business e-mails”. If this is allowed, then the existence of specific genres within the communicative medium of electronic mail (such as the short request note or the reprimand from senior manager to subordinates) may well also hold true. In the data collected for this case study, there are too few examples to
identify whether this is, or is not the case, and therefore it is not possible to identify whether any of the examples are prototypical of the genre. Even if such genres exist within the spectrum of message-types which are sent by electronic means, is there necessarily anything which differentiates them from their paper-based predecessors as a result of the electronic format in which they are written and received? Based on this analysis of a small number of such messages from a single company’s system, a tentative response to this question would seem to be that, apart from a number of surface adaptations to the form of greetings and closings, the answer is probably no.

**Academic E-mails**

The standard e-mail system used in academic circles differs from the CIST system in two main respects. Firstly, in that it is long-established, and secondly, in that it is an open system accessible to anyone also on the system around the world. Given these two factors, it is perhaps not surprising that even this small sample of messages contained such a diversity of apparent functions. In this data alone, it is used to disseminate information, to request information and respond to such requests to make contact, to maintain contact, to “chat”, to offer, to promote, and to enquire. In general terms, the stylistic register employed ranges from the semi-formal to the extremely informal, however, some messages display evidence that writers are mimicking a form of conversation, albeit conducted in extended time and with an absent interlocutor. In these cases in particular, there are indications that some users may view this medium of communication as impermanent and “throw away”, despite the fact that an electronically storable and printable record can be kept by the recipient. This data reveals that a number of users are aware of the novelty of the technology they are using, and some express delight, frustration or fascination with their use of it. But again, the question remains as to whether the messages which were studied represent a genre of written communication in their own right?

Having established earlier the grounds on which to answer this question, it is apparent from the preceding analysis of text features that the corpus as a whole does not constitute a single, recognisable genre. More specifically, it neither represents a single discourse community, nor encompasses communicative events which share a common purpose. By Swales’ definition (1990: 58), the data represents a random selection of communicative events that have a common medium of transmission as their only unifying feature. That aside, it is pertinent to ask whether the medium itself contains examples of genres within it. The common-sense answer to this, although unsupported by this data, would be that it almost certainly does. On a daily basis, academics request information from other academics, groups with special interests conduct open forums for discussion of their activities (see Wilkins, 1991), secretaries disseminate electronic events diaries, teachers use it to encourage co-operative writing among students (see Mabrito, 1991), and
there are many other possible examples. If we accept the likely existence of specific genres in this medium, the question once again is, are those genres specific to the medium and shaped by it? As with the commercial examples, the limited data corpus studied here prevents firm conclusions from being drawn, but there is some evidence in the data that, for certain types of message, writers are using the medium in a creative and sometimes conversational way, which may indeed be different to previously identified genres of communication. Perhaps the most interesting point of departure for future research arising from this study, might be to examine the extent to which a new genre of one-sided, extended time conversation is developing through the use of electronic communication.

By developing a common framework to examine the text features of data from two very different sources, this small-scale study has demonstrated a revealing approach to analysis for future e-mail research. If applied in larger-scale studies, this approach may help to define the use of the medium and to generate appropriate pedagogic guidelines for ESP teachers. As electronic messaging systems become ever more widespread, there is a real need for academic research to catch up with its task of adequately defining the manner in which people are already using this technology.

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