

“Dear Mr. Smith” vs “Hi there”: an investigation into the language of modern business emails

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Abstract

The modern world is becoming a really hectic place – the increasing pace of life demands faster and more efficient communication. This is particularly reflected in the business environment. The vast majority of communicative activity occurs via electronic means, with paper letters becoming obsolete. The fast pace pushes for a change in business register, away from the traditional formal letter, rules of writing which are often taught in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. Modern email is becoming less formal and begins to resemble spoken interaction. This study examined a number of business emails sent to the authors, who are both English L2 (second language) speakers. The authors wrote emails in the tradition of a formal paper letter, but the responses were found to be much more informal. Emails were much shorter than paper letters, the register seemed to have shifted towards very informal, comparable to conversational, and the use of personal pronouns increased. Moreover, emails seem to have developed a range of features typical of only this genre, like specific greetings and absence of elements that are normal for paper letters.

Introduction

In a modern European school, every pupil is taught about ancient civilisations which mastered different skills in a particular period of time. For example, the Greeks invented philosophy and Mathematics; Egyptians were masters at building, while the Chinese discovered how to make paper. One might imagine what impact it would have made if these nations had the means to communicate internationally and exchange knowledge much earlier – the technologies being developed today could have come into an existence and spread across the globe centuries ago. This brings us to the importance of globalisation in the world today, as it gives technology and consequently business a chance to expand to unlimited boundaries involving people from all over the world. Business has become increasingly dynamic, international corporations are being established globally, and a tremendous amount of resources are being transferred across borders. Economists write about expansion of international trade, increase in foreign direct investment and overall globalisation of business (e.g. O'Brien and Williams 2007).

Undoubtedly, rapidly growing businesses require rapid communication in order to keep up with the pace. Today, electronic media has proven to be an efficient and effective way of exchanging information. Now most business correspondence,

such as job applications, memorandums and even day-to-day matters are processed electronically. The use of electronic mail has become increasingly popular (see Crystal 2001; Radicati Group 2008a; Ferris Research 2005). These developments will be discussed in more detail below.

In business, one-to-one emails are seen as a replacement for a traditional business letter, although, as noted by a number of scholars (Baron 1998; Gimenez 2000; Danet 2002), emails are not written in the same manner as paper letters due to various factors, primarily the genre's environment. With a growing number of businesses and electronic mail users, an even faster way of writing and answering is required, hence a change in the register of an email will inevitably take place developing new features of the genre. The latter fact has already been examined by Gimenez (2000), a more detailed discussion of which will be provided below.

We have set out to explore the language of emails in a formal context, and try to update the prescriptive book examples. Danet (2002) writes that examples of business letters are outdated; prescriptive textbooks use some examples written as far back as the 1860s. Most importantly, we are interested in how modern time pressures have made business emails in our corpus different from the standard traditional business letters. In this article we look at the structure, lexis and register of an email and make note of what is particularly different from a prescriptive example.

Research background

Email has become an increasingly prevalent means of communication. According to *Internet Society* and *Matrix Information and Directory Services* (2000, cited in Crystal 2001), the number of internet users in 2000 reached 800 million. In 2008 the Radicati Group (2008a) estimated that there were two billion internet users worldwide. Rounded, the estimates show a 125% increase in eight years. Moreover, research by the Radicati Group (2008b) has shown that the number of business email users around the globe was approximately 831.7 million in 2008. By business we mean 'non-personal', i.e. the authors of these emails have professional relations with their correspondents. According to Ferris Research (2005), an individual business email user sends approximately 38 emails daily, while receiving 102. In the corporate world, email is replacing traditional means of information exchange, e.g. memos or phone calls (Markus 1994, cited in Baron 1998). A perfect example of this is provided by Microsoft Corporation, where 99% of communication takes place by email (Kinsley 1996, cited in Baron 1998).

Following the underlying trend, one may say that numbers will continue to increase in the coming years. Evidently, such pace of interaction between users is making it hard to keep up with all the formalities established by previous generations, such as traditional business letter format and register. Consequently, as we will reveal below, a shift in register has occurred, with reasons to believe it will continue to evolve in the forthcoming years.

As cited by Baron (1998, p.144), 'It is a linguistic truism that all living languages change'. Providing this statement is true, and since email is a piece of a living language, borrowing characteristics from endophoric and exophoric language (discussion of which will be provided below), Baron demonstrates that the language of email is bound to change.

Table 1 summarises examples of formal business letters given by Morton (1996); Jones, Bastow & Hird (2001); Cotton, Falvey & Kent (2001).

Table 1: Business letters – elements of the genre

Greeting	Dear “Title Surname” or “Dear Sir/ Madam”
Statement of purpose – why the person is writing	I write regarding the home-improvement loan that you have with Central South Bank I wish to express my thanks for...
Closing phrases	usually an encouragement to contact the sender
Ending	Yours sincerely or Yours faithfully
Signature	a full name

The authors of this paper are L2 English speakers who have learnt English through formal education and have been taught Standard English (SE) through prescriptive methods. Our generation was taught to write formal letters in an old-fashioned way and not much attention was paid to the rules of writing emails. Gimenez (2000) used 11 EFL textbooks and found that only two deal with email, leading to an assumption that teaching in writing emails (whether the students are L1 or L2 speakers) is not considered important, and that rules of writing emails are self-taught, leading to an independently developing genre. We found that the emails we analysed deviated from the much less formal example given by Cotton et al (2001).

Methodology

Data Collection and Analysis

A corpus of business emails was collected for the purpose of this assignment. The research participants included academics from several universities, Aston University staff and prospective employers. There were no family members of the researchers among the participants.

Due to the limited number of emails, we were able to use mostly qualitative techniques for data analysis. The emails in the corpus had been compared to the traditional textbook examples of formal letters, and presence/absence of, and differences in, the main features of a genre were discussed. Some quantitative methods (e.g. corpus-based research) were also used: a corpus of emails was created, totalling 27 letters from 15 authors and 1142 words. Aston University ACORN corpus (<http://acorn.aston.ac.uk>) was used as well.

Ethical issues

Ethical issues included getting written permission from the people involved in our project (i.e. academics, staff and prospective employers) through online consent forms. People involved in the project had no obligation to participate in this research and were able to withdraw from the project whenever they wished. They were also given the right to contact us at any time if they had any inquiries about the project. The identities of the authors are not revealed.

Analysis and discussion

Deviations from tradition

Length

Jones et al (2001), Crystal (2001) and Baron (1998) agree on one thing: emails have to be, and are, brief. The mean length of an email in the corpus of this research is 43 words; the length of the example paper letter in Morton (1996) is about twice that. Crystal (2001) says that it is a common practice to write emails so that they would fit onto one computer screen due to time constraints in the corporate world. Baron's (1998) findings reveal the same.

Greetings

During our research we have found many deviations from the traditional business style. As we will reveal below, the formal business register seems to be shifting towards a more informal register of friendly letters. One of the most prominent divergences from the traditional features of register has been found in greetings. There is no more "Dear^Title^Surname" structure: it has been replaced by structures like "Dear^First Name", "Hello^First Name", "Hi^First Name" and only the first name. According to Kay *et al* (2001) and Jones *et al* (2001), these structures are conventionally used, and are much more likely to occur, in personal, informal letters. Table 2 below summarises our findings.

Table 2: Greetings

Greeting	Raw frequency
Dear^First Name	8
Hello^First Name	4
Hi^First Name	4
First Name Only	4
Good Morning^First Name	3

Analysing the data in the table, a conclusion can be made that the "Dear^First Name" structure is still prevalent; the genre of a business email still bears old features of a traditional (though not formal) letter. However, starting an email with "Hello" and "Hi" is also becoming acceptable. It should be noted that the structure "Good Morning^First Name" was used in three letters by one person.

In the beginning it was presumed that greetings will be less formal in emails from staff at the researchers' University due to something that the authors and the correspondents have in common – in this case, the institution – which might contribute to a degree of actual or presumed familiarity. However, as more emails from people outside the University were analysed, it was revealed that both inside and outside emails had informal greetings.

A possible reason for informality in greetings is power relations. It is a tradition and common sense to greet and address a senior with respect (e.g. "Good morning, Mr^Last name" in speech or "Dear Mr^First Name" in writing), however a senior may address a junior (in rank or age) by their first name, and that will be considered to be acceptable. Baron (1998) also mentions the importance of power relations, saying that differences between forms of computer-mediated

communication (CMC) result from them. Although her own research has found that lack of the interlocutors' physical presence allows for a more 'level playing field than writing' (Baron 1998, p.151), it may not always be the case. The researchers' status within the exchange is lower than their addressees' (students vs. staff or lecturers; jobseekers vs. prospective employers), and therefore the greetings are less formal.

In some cases there was no greeting at all. In one example the presumed reason for the absence of the greeting is because the email was sent immediately after being read. This is consistent with Jones *et al* (2001), who say that salutations can often be omitted. As Danet notes:

Many people have commented that composing an email message feels like talking even though it is written; others have noted that at least in some respects it even looks like talking—some of its linguistic features resemble those of speech. Danet (2002, p.3)

Baron's (1998) research has also found similarities between email and speech in terms of immediate response possible, as well as various factors of informality (for further discussion see below). In fact, research on register of email being similar to speech dates as far back as Shapiro and Anderson (1985, cited in Baron 1998).

One may conclude from this that the fast-paced environment in which business emails are sent resembles a conversational environment: the co-respondents need to reply to each other's messages rapidly, without contemplating the form in great detail, focusing on the core of the message. This may lead to typos, which we have found as well, and which is also consistent with Baron's (1998) findings.

Another example has the first name of the addressee in the body of the email but not in the greeting, which greatly deviates from the conventional letter (formal or otherwise) format.

An interesting example of a greeting is "Hi there". During the corpus search, in the British National Corpus (BNC) the phrase was mostly found in dialogues in literature between friends or people well acquainted with each other (hence – informal spoken language); in ACORN there were only five results, of which three were in spam emails – apparently one of the most informal email types.

Signatures

Another significant shift from the prescribed 'standard' has been found in signatures. Morton (1996); Jones *et al* (2001); Cotton *et al* (2001) write that formal letters are signed with a full name, yet this rule was adhered to only in four out of 27 emails in the corpus. All the others were signed only by the first name. Moreover, it must be added that two out of four emails had a so-called 'automatic signature' which is created and pre-set, and then automatically added at the end of the email. This fact reduces the number of emails signed with a full name even more.

One email had no signature at all:

Dear S

It is good of you to put yourself forward as a student representative for Teaching Committee, but the slot for a Level 2 student has already been filled.

Thank you again for offering.

This could be explained by the email's structure: at the start of the text there is always a heading, wherein it is indicated who the sender and the recipient are, as well as the subject of the email.

Other features

Other features of the genre were absent in nearly all emails in our corpus or replaced by something very different. The statement of purpose was absent in all emails. The traditional "Yours sincerely" was replaced by more informal phrases, and the final paragraph phrase about contacting the sender was found in seven emails out of 27. There could be several reasons for the absence of some features above. The speedy information exchange process comes to mind: most of the emails were written in response to certain authors' queries, usually in a period of time ranging from a few minutes to a few hours.

Yet all the features of a genre cannot be attributed solely to the environment and context in which texts are produced. The most likely reason why the statement of purpose is absent lies in the interface of email pages. Emails have headings with fields indicating the sender (From), the addressee (To) and the subject, therefore it is easier for both users to state the topic in the subject field than to write an introductory sentence. In fact the technological environment in which emails are written makes the statement of purpose and signatures seem like unnecessary repetitions.

Formality and email's similarity to speech

Although characteristics of spoken and written languages usually differ, depending on context, Chafe (cited in Baron 1998, p.136) notices that spoken language may adopt some characteristics of the written language, while written language may borrow traits of speech. Although email is a way of recording language for distant communication and thus is classified as a written language, many features of speech have been noticed to be present in electronic mail. Baron (1998) has provided a thorough analysis of email language and how similar it is to speech. We have used her model of a spectral speech-writing continuum to analyse certain features in our corpus. Our findings are summarised in Table 3. Baron's findings date back to 1998, i.e. 11 years our research. Our current research might be observing new trends in emails.

Politeness				
Forms of Address	Formal		Informal	We found frequent usage of 1 st person (<i>I</i> – 20 times) and 2 nd person (<i>you</i> – 43 times) pronouns. Recipients are addressed by first name.
Salutation, Signature	Obligatory		Optional	Greetings and signatures discussed above.
Level of formality	High		Low	Our findings correlate with Baron's – email is more informal than writing, however it includes formal stylistics
Contextual Features				
Physical proximity	Separated in time and space		Face-to-face	Our findings correlate with Baron's – the means of communication allows, and the context of the environment demands, rapid response. Yet 'rapid' can mean from minutes to hours, depending, e.g. on the workload of the respondent

Table 3: Spectral analysis of emails adapted from Baron's (1998) model.

Features under headings of *Writing* and *Speech* formatted in bold are the prevalent ones.

Nature of conversation	Lack of physical presence helps level the field		Known age, gender, status contribute to hierarchy	Our corpus falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, particularly in terms of first name usage. There are two equal opinions – that through use of first names one can exercise power and that a first name used to address a senior may reduce power relations.
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As can be seen from our analysis, some features are the same as in Baron's findings, and some are opposite. Less adjectives and adverbs are used because Baron wrote about email in general, and we focus on business emails, which, although informal, are still presumably closer to writing. On the other hand, there are few subordinate clauses and disjunctions, which, as opposed to Baron's findings, leads to a conclusion that since 1998, emails, even business ones, have acquired elements typical of spoken language.

These include looking at an email as a dialogue (assuming that a quick exchange occurs), with elements of spontaneity (e.g. "No problem", occurring in the beginning of an email), simpler syntax ("Do you have the forms?"), dealing with present ("How are you getting on with the medical form?") and occasionally requires some sort of external contextualization (an email starting with "This is fine by me" or "That's absolutely fine" evidently requires an explanation or some point of reference to a previous conversation, which is not acceptable in a traditional letter). Moreover, according to Baron (1998), written language (especially in business letters) is considered to be formal. As we have observed, in many cases a limited amount of formality is present in the emails provided. As Baron (1998, p.147) sums up:

... email tends to use more casual lexicon, to be less carefully edited, and to assume a greater degree of familiarity with the interlocutor (...). In email, for example, the use of first names is quite common, even with people you have never met.

The lack of formality is expressed in contractions (don't, that's, I'm) and colloquial expressions ("It is a shame to have these clashes"; "emailing you a little while back", "Keep me informed"; "don't hesitate to get in touch"). Interesting trends were found in phrases used instead of "Yours sincerely". These are summarised in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Endings

Kind Regards	13
Best Regards	3
Best Wishes	2
Best	2
Regards	1

As it can be seen from Table 4, "Kind regards" is the most prevalent way to end an email. Taking all of the above into account, one may presume that it is a semi-formal expression and it is accepted by the majority of users. Cotton *et al* (2001) use "Best Wishes" in their example, which is still not from the register of friendly letters, like e.g. lots of love. Applying Baron's (1998) spectral model again, it leads to a conclusion that emails may be placed around the centre, but towards the informal side of a formal-informal spectrum, since although some formality is still retained, many features point to decreasing formality.

Conclusion

We have found that business emails have not only deviated greatly from traditional business letters, but also have developed specific features of their own. These include absence of the traditional elements of a formal letter, decreasing formality throughout the messages from greeting to closing phrases, and increasing similarity to speech.

There could be several reasons for this. One of the most important ones, is the environment in which emails are written. This includes the nature of business communication with the need for speedy exchange, making email resemble a spoken conversation. The other side is the way emails are structured, which leads to abandoning traditional business letter elements.

Another reason could be the power relations within the organisation, and the way co-respondents perceive their own power. This is reflected in formality of greetings, signatures and the lexicon (colloquial presumably being used by those of higher rank in the organisation).

There could be a third reason – the changing nature of business, going from a highly structured, formal organisation to a flatter, team-based one (for discussion of this see e.g. Keuning & Opheij 1994), which may presume that the formality is decreasing with the structural change, and the employees are having their faces visible behind their names.

All things considered, one may presume that an entirely new genre, with its unique register swinging around the middle of a speech-writing spectral continuum, has emerged. It is still developing, and has not settled down. The register of it is very far away from the formal, highly structured register of business letters, shifting

towards the register of friendly ones, and of spoken language with spoken grammar (contractions, ellipses, deictic features) and colloquial expressions.

Further research

One of the focal points of this research is comparison of emails to 'prescriptive' examples of business letters, looking for possible reasons for deviation in technological and corporate context; however indications for further research would be an investigation into the correlation between language used and gender as well as age. For example, it would be interesting to learn about the effect that the gender or age of participants has on formality of emails and their similarity to speech. During this research, the participants' gender was not accounted for; hence it is not really clear how language differs in this respect.

Moreover, due to time constraints, this research was not able to account for power relations and familiarity of the interlocutors within the organisation to a full extent. These topics could also be a vast area for further research.

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