

# Key principles of email language use case study of an individuals emails in diffe...

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## **Key Principles Of Email Language Use: Case Study of an Individual's Emails in Different Genres of Communication**

Communication is a social medium used to pass information and receive feedback. Since the invention of the internet, computer mediated communication had been used to facilitate communication. Emails are just one of the many forms of CMC that are widely used. Studies have revealed that individuals develop a distinct identity during a repeated communication process (Stein 2006). Since individuals regularly use the email for both official and unofficial communication, it is possible to study individual email communication to pinpoint identity patterns. This paper will use the case study of a lecturer's communication with his supervisor, students and family members to examine his identity construction in communication. The discussions will explain qualitatively the relationship between the emails and the perceived identity of the subject and how it influences his responses. In the end will draw conclusions based on the findings and give recommendations for further study.

### **Introduction**

An email is a popular text based form of Computer Mediated Conversation that is used to pass written messages across the internet. Users require email addresses in order to send electronic material from one address to the next. Just like in other form of communication, the individual component is pivotal to the communication process. The individual almost always relays a part of who they are in their messages. The context of the communication may limit the individual from full self expression, but one way or other, a

close study of the use of language can reveal distinct characteristics of the sender.

## **Statement problem**

Aim and Scope

This paper will limit itself to emails and email communication in different scenarios such as official and unofficial correspondents for one individual within a clearly specified timeframe.

## **Structure**

The key findings and conclusions of this paper will be based on a critical evaluation of existing theoretical work on computer mediated communication and linguistics. The case study will be used to test the theories and paint a clearer picture of how identity is developed in email communication.

## **Literature Review**

IGI Global (2010a) examines the peculiar strategies and linguistic structures that individuals employ while communicating with each other.

Communication platforms such as email has provided immeasurable ways of communicating and expressing individuals within technological environments. According to IGI Global (2010a), encoding strategies such as shortening of words and ignorance of standard grammatical encoding is widely used in email communication despite critics from parents and teachers. In IGI Global (2010b), the relationships between new communication technologies and the nature of processing communication is

examined in different technological models. In this chapter, it is argued that the increasing introduction of new technological tools and communication such as email and other computer-mediated strategies brings new understanding to the use of language in communication. For this reason, a model aimed at bringing enhanced Technology-conditioned approach to Language Change and Use (TeLCU) is proposed to help in identifying the relationship between the emergence of new tools and communication for understanding the use of language.

IGI Global (2010c) argues that technology is really changing the nature of communication. In this chapter, several features of information communication Technology (ICT) are employed to assist in developing a better understanding of the roles played by technology in bringing innovations in linguistics and communication. Monk and Hill (2000) argue that email communications brings enormous influence in communication and in influencing the behavior of the recipients. In their part, Hans van der Meij et al (2004) finds evidence that suggest that email usage in elementary school has brought predominant effects by influencing the typology structures of communications among students. Analysis of email dialogues among students reveals an introduction of new words in the field of email communication (Byam 2006)..

Bailey (2011) argues that majority of institutions in the United States communicate entirely through email. Before the advent of the internet, US academic libraries lacked competition and most patrons in these institutions were just captive audiences. He demonstrates the application of screen

casting in capturing the actions of students and university officials on computer screens while they communicate. Before delving into the dynamics of email identity, it is important to understand CMC and the internet as a medium for electronic communication. The internet was designed in 1960s by the United States government as a military defense mechanism. The ARPANET which was a defense sponsored project that was developed to interconnect the military computers to protect sensitive intelligence from destruction in case of a nuclear attack. The military network was adopted for public use in the 1980s when the global internet network was launched. In the 1990s commercial internet use propelled the internet from obscurity to worldwide use. Currently, the net supports over 2.2 billion users. This is roughly one third of the global human population.

Blotch (2002) relates on the development and integration of email into social and romantic relationships. It is amazing how emails have opened up an avenue to build relationships, strengthen them, and sometimes break them. A good example is emails between educators and their students. Many have used email to build such relationships that would have hardly existed before the era of electronic mail. Some students even use this as an avenue to explain to their educators about other personal relationships and the educators offer advice. It has expanded the benefits of postgraduate and undergraduate school by offering benefits as mentors and long life friends.

In some occasions, Blotch (2002) notes that educators understand better the needs of students. This improves the efficiency of the learning process since educators learn the weaknesses of the students and weaknesses. Based on

this interaction alone, they advise on the areas of education they should focus most. In addition, thanks to this benefit alone, motivation of both the educator and student improve immensely since both parties aim at impressing the other and causing the least discomfort in their endeavors.

Hassini (2004) base his ideas on a similar platform as Blotch (2002) only that he expands his idea in that email creates an avenue for teachers to mediate between the students and education. Notably, many students view education as a difficult part of their life and only view it as a right of passage. However, educators that recognize this can use email to reverse the thoughts and negative believes of students and replace them positive ones. Hassini (2004) explains that emails if used correctly may be used to richen the learning experience by providing a database that could be integrated in learning experience in the future.

Baron (1998) shows how advancement in telecommunication has defied the original rules created in communication in the past. Then, people could only communicate face to face or written where u could not have an immediate feedback. However, todays modes of communication expore diffrent dimensions of communication like telephone and video conferencing. Here, one can receive feedback even with difference in location. Other nonverbal cues also benefit communicators and understand better the message and feelings.

Gardon & Luke (2012) examine the communication level of postgraduate students and their supervisors. Research shows that politeness and

professional identity generate from email communication. They also discuss on how politeness affect professional identity development. This level of communication also creates supervisee competence in the student. It also links the student to their professional community. This acts as a great benefit for the supervisees who might explore these connections in the future to the advancement of their career. In addition, the students gain better understanding of their career through the communication avenue of email. In conclusion, it acts as a reference point in the future in case students need to refresh their memory on certain points in the future.

This case study will examine email correspondence of a 35 year old university lecturer undertaking his doctorate degree. The lecturer sends an average of 10 emails a day to various recipients. Most of his communication is between his professor, students, younger sister and his wife. The lecturer was an appropriate choice for the research because he relies heavily in the email to communicate. He uses the email to consult his thesis supervisor, communicate with his students, his wife and his sister who is planning her wedding.

A total of 56 emails were analyzed for difference in language use such as brevity, choice of words, politeness and formatting. The emails chosen were sent between Monday and Sunday. This time window was one aspect of controlling the communication environment. The intention was to identify the variation in email messages that occur despite of the setting. The assumption was that email sender is influenced greatly by the purpose and

the recipient rather than the environment or the time in which the message is sent.

The researcher received copies of the emails through the carbon copy option (CC) as soon as they were sent. The emails were then analyzed for the quality of sentences especially grammar, punctuation and spelling. The emails were also examined in terms of format, length and content. The results were compared to determine whether there were any clear patterns of writing which could be identified objectively as the lecturer's email identity.

The first sets of emails to be analyzed were those sent from the lecturer to his professor. The emails were written in an official language. The lecturer used short grammatical sentences to express his views. Most of his emails were seeking clarification or guidance on a particular aspect of his thesis. There was a thread of back and forth communication between the two which could be followed logically from beginning the current position. All communication was polite; there was deliberate use of submissive language such as " kindly confirm the time and the venue for the rescheduled meeting." There was no deviation from the subject matter which was the lecturer's dissertation. The subject which was the title of the dissertation was repeated in all the emails. The response time to the professor's reply was quicker despite containing large attachments of academic materials related to the dissertation.

The second sets of emails were sent between the lecturer and his students. In these correspondents, the lecturer assumed a position of power. This was



evident in the fact that the responses were very short and often failed to acknowledge the sender. By reading the correspondence, it was clear who the lecturer and who the student was. The lecturer often used generalizations such as “ Dear Student” to address an individual raising a concern regarding the class he teaches. He often replied with links to online academic resources or instructed the students to schedule an appointment to see him later through the student assistant. The lecturer’s replies were often sent hours after the initial email. Most of his responses were sent at least 4 hours after the receipt of the student email. The replies were sent within minutes of each other, meaning the lecturer designated a time in his schedule to reply to student mails.

The other set of emails were personal correspondence between the lecturer, his wife and his sister. Most of these emails are initiated by the wife and the sister. The lecturer responds to the wife’s love messages with endearing words although it is important to note that his responses were much shorter than the initial email from the wife. He replies in conclusive manner which prevents the wife from continuing with the same thread of communication. The emails from the sister are related to her upcoming wedding. The lecturer was an integral part of the planning process and was regularly put abreast with the progress in planning through the emails. In his responses he used measured responses which were friendly and concise. He always began by asking how the sister is doing. He then proceeded to commend the progress, recommend additional ways of improving the plan and finally (but rarely) seeking clarification on unclear issues. When asked why he preferred to

shorten communication through email, the lecturer responded by saying that he found telephone calls to be more effective since he could get instant feedback and gauge the efficacy of his responses.

Where the email user is at a disadvantaged or subordinate position such as the lecturer versus his supervisor, the lecturer uses polite language and submission to attract favor and consideration from the supervisor. He does all this to strengthen the rapport between him and his supervisor. This allows the lecturer to achieve some semblance of power balance by being able to successfully request for changes and adjustments where necessary. This is clearly demonstrated where he requests the supervisor to change the time and the venue of a scheduled meeting and confirm the new time and location to the lecturer.

The lecturer displays an oscillating position of influence in his communication with his family members. The lecturer cannot stop communication from his wife or his sister. Neither can he control the length of their emails. He only responds to the emails according to what the subject of the initial thread. If his wife sends him a love poem, he has no choice but to respond to the message with similar words of endearment and appreciation. He was however free to reduce the length of response and use the shortest sentences to reply the message. The lecturer was also free to respond to the emails whenever he found the time to, however, to avoid keeping his wife waiting, he would reply within an hour of receiving her message. He responded to his sister's messages in a more objective manner than to his wife. This is because the content of the messages was more predictable and

he could change the mode of communication to the telephone whenever he desired a quicker response.

The identity of the lecturer is constructed around competence and belonging. Competence is determined by one's evaluation of their ability, knowledge and skill in a particular area and the power such abilities affords them. Belonging describes the relationship an individual has with those he communicates with. The lecturer belongs to his family members while being part of a large community of scholars where he is a student and a teacher at the same time.

It is possible to construct the identity of the lecturer through his interaction with the people in his life. The lecturer develops a professional identity by construction basing his communication with his lecturer and students on academics only. Their communication is always guided by a clearly identified subject matter. Communication with his professor is centered on his dissertation while correspondence with his students is limited to the coursework. Brevity of communication is adhered to unless the issue requires a lengthy discourse, in which case the lecturer recommends a face to face meeting.

Informal interaction between the lecturer and his family are broader. The subject can range from a specific issue such as the wedding planning to random romantic sentiments from the lecturer's wife. His responses to these types of emails measured to the point of delivering an acceptable reply without coming across as cold or unemotional. The lecturer maintains his identity by using the responses to reduce the length and frequency of

communication. He also uses endearing words such as “ thank you dear”, and “ Hallo darling” to demonstrate his enthusiasm to the recipient.

A better study would have analyzed the content of the respondents’ replies in order to understand their influence on the subject’s identity. Since emails are interactive and transactional in nature, it is possible that the subject borrows part of his identity from the respondents. To establish if there is any causal relationship between the two, the responses should be compared to the subject’s replies to identify copied patterns and reactions to replies.

## **Conclusions**

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