

Orality and literacy, formality and informality in email communication

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Abstract

Approaches to the linguistic characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC) have highlighted the frequent oral traits involved in electronic mail along with features of written language. But email is today a new communication exchange medium in social, professional and academic settings, frequently used as a substitute for the traditional formal letter. The oral characterizations and linguistic formality involved in this use of emails are still in need of research. This paper explores the formal and informal features in emails based on a corpus of messages exchanged by academic institutions, and studies the similarities and differences on the basis of their mode of communication (one-to-one or one-to-many) and the sender's mother tongue (native or non-native). The language samples collected were systematically analyzed for formality of greetings and farewells, use of contractions, politeness indicators and non-standard linguistic features. The findings provide new insights into traits of orality and formality in email communication and demonstrate the emergence of a new style in writing for even the most important, confidential and formal purposes which seems to be forming a new sub-genre of letter-writing.

Keywords: CMC, asynchronous communication, formality, informality, email style.

Resumen

Oralidad y escritura, formalidad e informalidad en la comunicación por correo electrónico

Estudios sobre las características lingüísticas de la comunicación por ordenador han resaltado la presencia frecuente de rasgos orales en el correo electrónico junto con las características propias del lenguaje escrito. Pero el correo electrónico es hoy en día un nuevo medio de intercambio de información en

entornos sociales, profesionales y académicos, usado con frecuencia en sustitución de la carta formal tradicional. Las características orales y la formalidad lingüística patente en este uso del correo electrónico no están lo suficientemente investigadas. Este artículo analiza las características formales e informales del correo electrónico a partir de un corpus de mensajes enviados y recibidos entre instituciones académicas y estudia las similitudes y diferencias teniendo en cuenta su modo de comunicación (uno a uno o uno a muchos) y la lengua materna del remitente (nativo o no nativo). Los correos electrónicos que componen el corpus han sido analizados teniendo en cuenta la formalidad de los saludos iniciales y las despedidas, el uso de contracciones, los indicadores de cortesía y las características lingüísticas no normalizadas. Los resultados nos ofrecen un punto de vista novedoso acerca de la oralidad y formalidad en la comunicación por correo electrónico y confirman el auge de un nuevo estilo de escritura utilizado incluso para comunicar temas importantes, confidenciales y formales que puede llegar a crear un nuevo subgénero en la redacción de cartas.

Palabras clave: comunicación electrónica, comunicación asincrónica, formalidad, informalidad, estilo del correo electrónico.

1. Introduction

While language studies were traditionally based on written text, today much emphasis is laid on oral text and on the interaction between orality and literacy. A case in point is email communication which, although written, has a style that has been defined as “computer conversation” (Murray, 1991) or “written speech” (Maynor, 1994) because of the frequent oral traits found in it. This feature seems to have been intrinsic to email, especially in its early days, when it was mainly used by computer specialists to communicate informally and its style was closer to a form of conversation than to a traditional letter. As Marks (1999) argues, the idea of immediacy implied in these early email exchanges contributed to give rise to its conversational tone. However, the extended use of email in the last decade in social, professional and academic settings, frequently taking the place of the traditional formal letter, has changed this situation, with more formal traits being carried over to emails. As Yates (2000: 233) points out, computer-mediated communication (CMC) and electronic mail represent “a new stage in the history of letter writing”. Emails have altered the way we write, the genres we use and how we send and receive information (Peretz, 2005).

This mixture of styles found in emails has led many authors to stress that CMC clearly contains oral traits along with features characteristic of the

written language (Murray, 1991; Maynor, 1994; Yates, 1996; Baron, 1998 & 2000; Crystal, 2001; Yus, 2001; Posteguillo, 2003; Pérez Sabater, 2007). These changes in the use of email and styles have been accompanied by transformations in the fundamental concepts underlying the academic study of computer-mediated communication. Initial research in CMC was largely dominated by research paradigms taken from the field of information systems that highlighted the limitations of on-line communication: the Information Richness Theory (IRT) paradigm developed by Daft & Lengel (1984) considered CMC as a “lean” communication medium in comparison with face-to-face communication. Similarly, the cues-filtered-out approach drew particular attention to the lack of social cues, like body language and intonation, in CMC. Such views of computer-mediated communication tended to alert to dangers of antisocial behaviour, like flaming¹, “lengthy, aggressive” messages (Crystal, 2001: 54), and to predict that email would be useful only for certain simple communication tasks.

These negative views of CMC, which emphasized its impoverished nature in comparison with face-to-face communication, were not borne out in field studies and were questioned in the 1990s. Ngwenyama & Lee (1997: 164), for example, working within the critical social theory paradigm and drawing on the work of Habermas², posit “a rich, multi-layered, contextualized formulation of communicative interaction in electronic media”, claiming that:

When people communicate, they do not send messages as electronically linked senders and receivers. They perform social acts in action situations that are normatively regulated by, and already have meaning within, the **organizational context**. As organizational actors, they simultaneously enact existing and new relationships with one another as they communicate. (Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997: 164)

The work of Walther (1992 & 1996), within the social-emotional model of CMC, has also cast doubt upon initial findings that viewed CMC as an impaired communication medium due to the lack of nonverbal cues. Walther (1992: 52) suggests that “users may develop relationships and express multidimensional relational messages through verbal or textual cues”. Walther’s research has led to the influential hyperpersonal model of computer-mediated communication, according to which, besides impersonal and interpersonal communication, CMC allows the possibility of hyperpersonal communication as it paradoxically allows users to more

control over their presentation of self than in face-to-face communication (Walther, 1996). Within such a framework, it may be interesting to examine the presentation of self in emails written in different social situations and to examine if the linguistic devices used in this presentation of self exhibit cultural variations depending on the writer's mother language.

A lot of research into CMC to date has focused on the linguistic characteristics of electronic communication and on the formal and informal features based on group-based asynchronous communication. However, relatively little has been published on the characteristics of private email exchanges in academic settings. In this paper we compare different linguistic features of emails in English on the basis of their mode of communication (one-to-one or one-to-many) and the sender's mother tongue (native or non-native). The study is based on 100 private institutional mails exchanged by university representatives dealing with the topic of student exchange programs totalling 11,900 words. The linguistic features analysed are:

1. formality of greetings and farewells;
2. the use of contractions;
3. the number of politeness indicators per message; and
4. the number of non-standard linguistic features per message.

Our initial hypotheses, based on previous research, are that computer-mediated communication reflects the informalization of discourse (Fairclough, 1995) and that CMC is not homogeneous but is made up of a number of genres and sub-genres that carry over distinctive linguistic features of traditional off-line genres. In this context, it was assumed that one-to-many emails would display features associated with formal business letters, whereas one-to-one emails would be less formal. The aim of the study is to corroborate these hypotheses and to determine if native and non-native writers display the same level of formality.

2. Methodology

In order to study the degree of formality of emails an analysis was made of a corpus of email messages exchanged by members of academic institutions on the topic of student exchange programs. A total of 100 email messages were analysed: 25 one-to-many native messages, 25 one-to-one native messages, 25 one-to-many non-native messages and 25 one-to-one non-

native messages. In the examples we have changed the names and the email addresses of all the persons involved.

In the parameter of the formality of greetings and farewells, the presence of traditional epistolary conventions was examined by taking into account two factors. Firstly, each message's greeting and sign-off were assigned values along a continuum of 0 to 1 using the criteria shown in Table 1. These criteria provide an *ad hoc* measure of formality/informality insofar as they were established after an initial examination of the corpus. Thus, greetings beginning with "Dear Mr/Dr + second name" were considered very formal, "Dear + first name" formal, "Hello + name" informal, and "Hi" or "Hey" very informal. Similarly, sign-offs like "Yours sincerely" were rated as very formal, "Regards" or "Best wishes" informal and "Cheers", "Bye" or "Kisses" very informal. To assign the numerical value each message was examined by two of the authors and in cases of doubt by all three.

Formality of greetings and closings	
Very formal, separate from message body	1.0
Very formal non-separate	0.9
Formal separate	0.8
Formal non-separate	0.7
Informal separate	0.4
Informal non-separate	0.3
Very informal separate	0.2
Very informal non-separate	0.1
No greeting or farewell	0

Table 1. Assignment of formality degree.

Secondly, the number of steps involved in the farewell was counted, that is if there is a one step closing ("Yours faithfully") or a two step closing with a pre-closing ("I look forward to hearing from you. Yours faithfully").

In the parameter of contractions, the number of the total possible contractions were counted, the full forms used ("I am") and the actual contractions made ("I'm"). Verbal politeness indicators such as "please" or "thank you" were calculated per message. In the parameter of non-standard linguistic features, misspellings ("wich" instead of "which"), occurrences of non-standard grammar and spelling ("u r" instead of "you are"), paralinguistic cues ("write soon!!!") and emoticons (":-)") were counted per message.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Formality of greetings and farewells

The first feature analysed is that of the formality of greetings and farewells. There is ample literature on the role and nature of greetings in face-to-face communication. Most scholars would agree with Duranti (1997) that, far from being a mere formula, a mere “courteous indication of recognition” of the interlocutor, as Searle & Vanderveken (1985: 216) argue, the act of greeting implies that a social encounter is taking place “under particular socio-historical conditions and [that] the parties are relating to one and another as particular types of social personae” (Duranti, 1997: 89). Duranti’s “rich” interpretation of greetings parallels Ngwenyama & Lee’s (1997: 164) insistence that in CMC we encounter “social actors”, “performing social acts” within an “organizational context”. It is not surprising therefore that in research into CMC too, and more especially in studies of email, the nature of greetings and farewells has received a great deal of attention. Herring (1996a: 96) includes them in her proposal of a basic electronic message schema as “epistolary conventions”.

A number of scholars have classed greetings and farewells as the most salient structural features of an email (De Vel et al., 2001; Bunz & Campbell, 2002; Abbassi & Chen, 2005). Duranti’s claim that greetings are rich in social meaning would seem to be borne out by studies of greetings and closings in email. Thus, Abbassi & Chen (2005: 69) claim that, in forensic linguistics, these features “have been shown to be extremely important for identification of online messages”. Bunz & Campbell (2002) have studied the important role played by greetings and farewells in setting the tone of email interactions. In the framework of accommodation theory, they examined how structural politeness markers, like explicit greetings and closings, and verbal politeness markers, like “please” and “thank you”, influence the extent to which individuals accommodate to politeness markers. They found that “[v]erbal politeness indicators alone did not result in overall more polite responses, but structural politeness indicators did” (Bunz & Campbell, 2002: 19).

The results of the analysis of our corpus are shown in Table 2. These results largely conform to our initial hypotheses and corroborates Lan’s findings (2000), but with interesting variations. It is clear that, in one-to-many messages, the greetings are very formal (1.0, the highest possible score, for

natives and 0.93 for non-natives). As regards one-to-one communication both native and non-native salutations are more informal: 0.51 for natives and 0.74 for non-natives. In one-to-one communication, non-native writers are more formal for all categories (see also Ancarno, 2005), possibly because they feel insecure linguistically. The sharp asymmetry between the formality of salutations and farewells of native one-to-many emails (1.0 vs. 0.41) is striking. Although more research is needed in this area, a tentative explanation may be that the information and formality of the sign-off is being transferred to the email's header and the electronic signature.

Formality of greetings and farewells			
	Salutation	Farewell	Steps
one-to-many native	1.0	0.41	1.12
one-to-one native	0.51	0.53	1.08
one-to-many non-native	0.93	0.51	1.18
one-to-one non-native	0.74	0.61	1.69

Table 2. Formality of greetings and farewells.

Our study suggests that both native and non-native writers seem to be acutely aware of the importance of greetings and farewells: in both cases there is a clear distinction between the level of formality in messages to many individuals, which tend to be very formal and those addressed to a single person, which tend to be less formal. The formal openings of the emails to many individuals may reflect the fact that the writer is aware of his/her role as an organizational actor, that s/he is relating to the others in the social persona of representative of his/her institution. The formality of the greeting also suggests that there is a clear carryover from traditional business letters, that CMC genres are “developments of and related to previous written genres” as Yates (2000: 246) claims. These formal greetings are clearly politeness markers that seek to establish or maintain group cohesion by attending to the recipient's face needs³. Almost all the greetings are inclusive (“Dear Colleagues/Dear Partners/Dear All”). Only one email used the traditional “Dear Sir” or “Madam”.

The greetings in one-to-one emails are, in general, markedly less formal but there is a great deal of variation, depending on a number of factors. One important factor is evidently whether there has been previous correspondence or not. In the latter case, we find openings similar to those of formal letters as Example 1 shows. In the case of native emails addressed

to acquaintances there is a great deal of variety, but “Dear + first or second name” represents over 50% of the corpus, while the conversational greetings “Hi” and “Hello” make up less than 10%. In two cases, it would seem that the lack of a greeting is intended to express a certain brusqueness as the message is about a failure to meet appropriate deadlines.

```
From: "Kelly Realy" ierkelly@oklahoma.ac
To: via@upvnet.upv.es
Subject: program dates
Date sent: 17 Nov 2006 00:15

Dear Mr. Mayordomo,

I am writing on behalf of Nick Ryers from University of
Oklahoma, International Exchange Programs Office ...
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Example 1. One-to-one native speakers.

It is, of course, important to remember that lack of formality may, in the case of one-to-one messages in situations of on-going communication, be associated with the informal language used with friends, as we can see in Example 2, where lack of formality is accompanied by a mention of interest in the recipient’s weather situation.

```
Date: 25 Feb 2002 15:03
From: "Ken O'Hara" kohara@maths.dit.ie
Subject: Re: Examination
To: carmen@upvnet.upv.es
Organization: Dublin Institute of Technology
Priority: normal

O.K. Carmen, thanks for that. When is the end of semester exam?
I saw a satellite picture of East of Spain clear of cloud while
we are covered. However May is usually nice here.

Ken
```

Example 2. One-to-one native speakers.

It is in this kind of one-to-one message that we find something of the conversational immediacy mentioned by Marks (1999: 9): “[t]he mere fact that email gives a suggestion of immediacy seems to give rise to a more informal, conversational tone”. Finally, it may be interesting to note that the variation between one-to-one and one-to-many greetings is greater for native writers, which perhaps suggests that they are more sensitive to the social nuances involved. This might also be indicative of the fact that native

command of the language permits variation as a natural phenomenon directly connected to their communicative capacity.

Sign-offs seem to be a lot less formal than greetings and the asymmetry is especially marked for one-to-many native emails. Both points require further research, but, as we have suggested above, a tentative explanation, in the case of one-to-many communication, may be that in emails in which the writer is clearly acting as a representative of his/her institution, the formality of the sign-off is being transferred to the electronic signature.

3.2 Contractions

The use of contractions is a clear marker of informality in written English and reflects the use of shortened forms in conversation (Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 2002). Table 3 shows the results for contractions in the corpus analysed: the total possible contractions, the full forms used and the actual contractions made.

Contractions			
	Possible contractions	Full forms	Contractions
one-to-many native	116	115 (99.13%)	1 (0.87%)
one-to-one native	111	109 (98.19%)	2 (1.81%)
one-to-many non-native	47	42 (89.36%)	5 (10.64%)
one-to-one non-native	79	72 (91.13%)	7 (8.87%)

Table 3. Contractions.

The analysis of the corpus surprisingly revealed a very small percentage of contractions in native emails (0.87% and 1.81%). This in part may be due to the fact that secondary education students in the United States and the United Kingdom are taught never to use contractions in formal writing. Baron (2004) also obtains a smaller percentage of contractions than expected in her study about the language of telephone text messages. In our study, apart from the small number of contractions used in the messages, it is also important to mention the fact that contractions were more frequent in non-native emails (10.64% and 8.87% vs. 0.87 and 1.81). The greater use of contractions by non-native participants may reflect real stylistic differences for this informality marker. Although non-native speakers tend to be more formal in most parameters of this study such as salutations and farewells, in contractions they are less formal. This seems to constitute a significant stylistic variation between native and non-native speakers.

Although the size of the corpus does not permit any conclusive generalization, it may be interesting to point out that, while native speakers conformed to our initial hypothesis (in percentage terms, there are fewer contractions in the one-to-many emails), non-native speakers did not, as they used more contractions in one-to-many than in one-to-one communication. Many CMC researchers such as Collot & Belmore (1996), Baron (1998), Gimenez (2000) and Herring (2006) point out that the use of contractions is an outstanding characteristic of electronic discourse. However, the results obtained in this analysis show a different tendency. As the writers of these emails have decided not to use contractions in their writings, they have judged it appropriate to represent the institution they work for as formally as possible. Example 3, written by a native speaker, shows the absence of this marker of informality.

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From: "Peter, Jones" P.Jones@cranfield.ac.uk
To: maria@ri.usal.es
Subject: Visit
Date: 30 Nov 2006 16:39

Dear Maria,

It was a great pleasure to meet with you last week. Thank you
very much for your time. We had a superb time in your town. Both
Antonio and Irene were very helpful. Irene gave us a good tour
of the University and the city, we were very impressed. We hope
to further our collaboration with you in the coming academic
year - perhaps to begin with in some industrial projects as we
discussed in the meeting. I will contact Irene and Antonio to
discuss these possibilities.

Thanks again for your effort and time, and please let us know
when you visit the UK, we will be delighted to meet with you.

Best regards,

Peter.

```

Example 3. One-to-one native speakers.

As Example 3 shows, the outstanding absence of contractions in most of the emails in this corpus suggests that, although many scholars have characterised computer-mediated discourse as a register where reduction processes usually take place (Ferrara et al., 1991), this is not always the case, as this reduction strategy does not occur in our corpus of private institutional messages.⁴

3.3 Politeness indicators

Measures of politeness indicators have been obtained by counting the number of expressions of gratitude and pragmatic, routine formulae used in the mails. Following Bunz & Campbell (2002), in this parameter we have included verbal markers for politeness such as “thank you”, “please”, “I would appreciate”, “would you please” or “I am very grateful”. We consider in our analysis that the more politeness indicators included in a message, the more formal it is (Duthler, 2006).

Politeness indicators per message	
one-to-many native	3.22
one-to-one native	2.28
one-to-many non native	1.09
one-to-one non-native	1.31

Table 4. Politeness indicators per message.

As shown in Table 4, native emails contain the highest number of politeness indicators per message. Native speakers use considerably more semantic politeness indicators than non-native speakers. Biber et al. (2002) argue that stereotypic politeness indicators are more typical of English than, for example, honorifics to express personal stance (“would you” or “could you”). It is also worth noting that, whereas native writers use more politeness indicators in the more formal, one-to-many emails than in one-to-one communication, non-native writers use more politeness indicators in one-to-one communication. This may constitute a significant stylistic difference between native and non-native writers but, given the size of the corpus, more research is needed to confirm this. Example 4 shows an email in which, although the opening and closing structure may be considered informal, four politeness indicators are used in the message.

Unlike the style of Example 4, Example 5 shows a very clear oral style in the text: it is a written conversation where the politeness indicator included is also very informal and direct. The abundance of misspellings and grammatical errors may tend to increase the informal tone of the message. The orality of the written text of Example 5 is not very common in the corpus studied. It would be a clear example of what the early studies of CMC such as those of Yates & Orlikowski (1992) or Maynor (1994) highlighted –i.e., the informality of electronic discourse. Nevertheless, the results of our analysis seem to show a high percentage of politeness indicators in emails because the authors of these messages want to write as

politely as they would in a traditional institutional letter. It seems that here there is clear carryover from the traditional business letter and memorandum as Yates and Orlikowski (1992) had argued.

```
From: "Gillian Anne Forest" G.A.Forest@derby.ac.uk
To: juan@aq.upm.es
Subject: Conference Posters
Date: 27 Jan 2006 13:26

Juan

Hope you are well. [our emphasis]

On speaking to Gisela at the conference, she said you would be able [our emphasis] to supply us with a disk for the excellent posters that you printed advertising the conference. Would you please be kind enough [our emphasis] to forward one to us.

Many thanks [our emphasis]

Gill Forest

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Example 4. One-to-one native speakers.

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From: DOT.SSA GERMANA ROSSI
To: pilar@idm.upv.es
Sent: March 09, 2005 3:29 PM
Subject: Teaching staff mobility

Hallo Pilar,
how are you ? Here is fine, but very busy, as usual.
Unfortunately, this year I can'y came to Valencia, but a
colleague of mine: Julia Romeo jromeo@dns.agrsci.unibo.it, will
be happy to come and teach about Agrometeorology, if you agree.
She will prefer at the end of April.
Please let her know as soon as possible, if you are interested.
[our emphasis]
Best regards

Germana Rossi
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Example 5. One-to-one non-native speakers.

3.4 Non-standard linguistic features

Many researchers in CMC consider non-standard linguistic features one of the most salient elements of electronic discourse (Ferrara et al., 1991; Maynor, 1994; Werry, 1996; Baron, 1998 & 2000; Murray, 2000; Yus, 2001;

Crystal, 2001; Posteguillo, 2003; Herring, 2006). As Herring (2006) points out, these features show the ability of users to adapt the computer medium to their expressive needs. The need to write expressively and show affect in electronic discourse is suggested by Yates (2000: 249) who claims that “CMC is clearly a medium in which the expressions of affect take place, something one does not expect from written texts in most US/European cultural contexts”.

In this paper we follow Biber et al. (2002) who consider that the inclusion of non-standard linguistic features is an indication of the informality of the text. The results for the number of non-standard linguistic features per message are shown in Table 5.

Non-standard linguistic features per message			
	Misspellings	Non standard grammar/ spelling	Paralinguistic cues/ emoticons
one-to-many native	0.11	0.06	0.17
one-to-one native	0.28	0.04	0.04
one-to-many non-native	0.32	0.23	0.55
one-to-one non-native	0.08	0.12	0.50

Table 5. Non-standard linguistic features per message.

The small number of errors per message is striking; it is probably because writers are aware that they represent their academic institutions and want to be as formal as possible. The smallest number is in non-native speakers, as they may be more concerned about the idea of showing their accuracy in English. This small number of errors per message has also been studied by Lan (2000) who claims that non-native speakers are afraid of being judged by their accuracy in English. However, in general the results obtained in this study do not agree with previous important studies on electronic discourse which consider misspelling an important characteristic of this type of discourse such as that of Crystal (2001: 111) who argues that “misspellings are a natural feature of the body message in an email [...] a contrast with what would happen if someone wrote a traditional letter containing such errors”. Some scholars such as Yus (2001) suggest that the orality of the electronic text also implies a particular use of grammar and spelling. However, in this study the scores for non-standard grammar and spelling are very low. Nor did we appreciate the frequent lack of capital letters in our corpus that Maynor (1994) found in her study. In the data of the present study, the grammatical norms of formal letters seem to be firmly in place.

Many scholars have claimed that a characteristic of electronic discourse is the representation of paralinguistic features in written discourse by means of paralinguistic cues such as the use of capital letters to indicate “shouting” and the rhetorical, emphatic use of reduplicated punctuation marks (YOU DON’T KNOW???), and emoticons –i.e., multi-character glyphs normally used to express emotions, like smileys, :-), and frownies, :-(. These strategies “rather than reflecting impoverished or simplified communication, demonstrate the ability of users to adapt the computer medium to their expressive needs” (Herring, 2006: 5). Nevertheless, in this corpus writers have very rarely used such discourse strategies. The results are similar to those obtained by Crystal (2001) or Baron (2004). Non-native speakers use paralinguistic cues and emoticons more, probably because it is easier for them to use these resources to be creative.

The email of Example 6, written by a non native speaker, shows one of the few messages where an emoticon is included. Although scholars focused mainly on these non-standard features to characterise CMC during the 90’s, recent studies such as Climent et al. (2003) and Baron (2004) have pointed out that these discourse strategies are often used in texts written by teenagers but are rarely found in other speech communities. The results of our analysis show that electronic messages written by adults in an academic, formal environment display fairly standard English. The typical characteristics scholars have pointed out as specific of CMC vary according to context, thus “patterns of language use in CMC reflect both the capabilities of the medium and the characteristics of the group” (Yates & Orlikowski, 1993: 14).

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From: Thomas Fischner Tfishner@munchen.de
To: maria@upc.es
Subject: Conference Posters
Date: 17 Jan 2005 15:14

Dear Maria,

thanks very much for your quick response. Yes, the study guide
in English you offered would be very helpful. Here is my
complete postal address (P/O box) so no street is
required :-) [our emphasis]

Thomas Fischner
Lehrstuhl für Kommunikationsnetze
80290 München
Germany

I am very grateful for your support!

Regards,

Thomas Fischner

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Example 6. One-to-one non-native speakers.

4. Conclusions

Results tend to suggest that there are significant stylistic and pragmatic differences between emails that can be established on the basis of their mode of communication. We have found that one-to-one emails incorporate more informal, conversational features. This relative informality is expressed most clearly in the tone set by the greetings and sign-offs and in the inclusion of more topics related to phatic rather than merely ideational, communication. This informalization is not generally reflected in the formal features of the texts (contractions, misspellings, emoticons, etc.). One line of further research will be to examine if this is true of other forms of CMC such as on-line fora.

In the one-to-many mode of communication, we have found that the emails examined exhibit a clear carryover from the traditional formal business letter in almost all aspects except the sign-off. More investigation is required in this area: one hypothesis that may be worth pursuing is that the formality of the sign-off in traditional business letters is being transferred to different formal elements of email (information included in the header and the possibility of including an automatically generated electronic signature).

The sensitivity to differences in formality between one-to-one and one-to-many emails would tend to bear out Herring's (2006: 11) point that "despite being mediated by 'impersonal machines', reflects the social realities of its users".

Finally, the results of the corpus analysed seem to indicate that stylistic and pragmatic features, like structural and lexical politeness indicators, may be a significant parameter delimiting native and non-native varieties.

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NOTES

¹ Crystal (2001: 55) defines "flames" as messages that are "always aggressive, related to a specific topic, and directed at an individual recipient".

² For Ngwenyama & Lee (1997), the German philosopher's theory of communicative action allows us to

construe communicative richness not simply as a function of the capacity of the channel but as a concept which includes the way a person actively processes information within a specific organizational context.

³ Work on face, or the image of self presented and recognised in everyday life, derives from Goffman's (1959) work and is a corner-stone of politeness theory as developed by Brown & Levinson (1978).

⁴ One of the reasons why this particular example does not use contractions is not because natives have decided to formal representation of the institution as much as it does represent a rather firm negative response to terminate the Socrates link.