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## The emergence of a new discourse for business communication, ‘a case study of e-mails in shipping company’

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### Abstract

E-mail, as an example of electronic medium, has assumed functions which are in some cases associated with spoken language and in other cases associated with formal writing. David Crystal (2001) considers that online language as a new species of interaction, a genuine “third medium”. Business professionals in Algeria have to improve their employees’ English competence in order to be efficient in international trade. In order to prove that e-mail is not only a medium, but a new style of communication as well; 175 business e-mails exchanged between the employees of the shipping company concerned were sampled to identify the rhetorical structure. The analysis based on the corpus reveals features that make up the pattern of business e-mail; it also shows that the electronic channel has an impact on the choice of the language exponents. A wide range of abbreviations represented in letter and number homophones is frequent. Moreover, syntactic reductions are used. The e-mail as a new emerging medium is a new type of discourse. It is a discourse that is developing its own language. In order to bridge the gap between theory and practice, tasks in business communication course should involve students in real business situation to familiarize them with the social features and interactional aspect of the language.

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### 1. Introduction

English is the language that makes the world go round. The world of business does not exclude the use of English because it is conducted on a global scale. The beginning of the 21st century is a time for global transition. According to some experts, faster economic globalization is going hand in hand with the growing use of English. More and more people are being encouraged to use English rather than their own language. Strevens (1987), states that “English is used by more people than any other language on the earth, although its mother-tongue speakers make up

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a quarter or fifth of the total". The importance of English is not just in how many people speak it but for what purpose it is used. English is the primary language used in international business since when executives have no language in common; they are likely to use English. So, business professionals in Algeria have to improve their employees' English competence in order to be efficient in international trade. Clearly, English is the leading international language and its leadership continues to grow since it is a common language used in internet based communication.

Globalization and the fast world of business have also turned the electronic mail into a prominent alternative to business letter. Ten years ago companies were not as global as they are now. But today, with the advances in technology all companies have the ability to be global and have a global audience. In order to accomplish work, it is ever more important to connect, communicate and collaborate on a global basis. Technology in this respect is a great enabler. Business communication in the shipping company concerned is mainly performed through e-mails. These latter are the constituents of the analyzed corpus, the analysis will reveal features that make up the pattern of business e-mails and show to what extent the electronic channel has an impact on the choice of the language exponents.

The implication of this study is devoted to pedagogical applications of its analysis results. In teaching Business English, target needs have a great impact on designing a syllabus since we take into consideration the necessities which are the type of needs determined by the demand of the target situation. The e-mail is the largest repository of corporate documents today. One must manage it according to business value; students should be involved in authentic business situations. The aim of this research is therefore two-fold; it will first identify the most relevant features which emerge from studies in the language of business e-mail communication, and then explore different possible pedagogical applications of these findings in Business English class.

## **2. Literature review**

E-mails are one of the most widely used forms of Computer Mediated Communication (CMA). Aside from its use in direct interpersonal communication, it is also used for communication among groups that share common interests or goals. Regarding the burgeoning literature on how to characterize e-mail linguistically we recognize a variety of views of the medium. Two approaches attempt to pigeonhole e-mail into the mould of existing modalities of communication: either e-mail is essentially a written message transmitted by a new electronic medium or it is speech that is written to be transmitted. These two views predominated in the early days of e-mail.

On the other hand, language and media specialists have now moved to a more complex model: the "mix and match" approach, which focuses on the speech like qualities of e-mail in on hand and qualities that are more like writing in another. In the last ten years, the language of business e-mails has been researched from several perspectives, providing different views on this new emerging communication genre. Baron (1998) states that the medium through which a written message is conveyed can also alter the linguistic content of messages, including orthography, vocabulary choice, syntactic structure and conventions semantic appropriateness. Such effects have been described for the printing press, the telegraph and most recently, the computer. Baron (2000) has also dealt with stylistic features such as the length of messages, abbreviated and elliptical forms and informality. These features made the style of e-mail reminiscent of telegraphic language. In addition, Collot and Belmore (1996) have indicated that the nature of the language used in e-mails is closer to the spontaneous genres like speeches and interviews than it is informational genres as official documents. They explained that electronic language has unique situational features, so they assume that it has a distinctive set of linguistic features as well. For them it is one of the important features of electronic language. A non-narrative and highly persuasive discourse type and hybrid variety of English. Gimenez (2000) also analyzed the textual features of business e-mails, and his data showed examples that reveal a certain relaxation in the style and register of business emails.

E-mail as an example of electronic medium, has assumed functions which are in some cases associated with spoken language and in other cases associated with formal writing. In order to better assimilate the linguistic features of e-mails, it is important to take into consideration the relationship between writing and speech as a continuum and not as a dichotomy (Crystal 2004). Crystal also states that computer mediated communicated is not identical to either speech or writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties of both. What makes e-mail

so interesting as a form of communication is that it relies on characteristics belonging to both spoken and written language.

### 3. Method

The researcher collected a corpus of one hundred seventy five business e-mails for a discourse analysis written in English by thirty two Algerian employees at different organizational levels. The language of business e-mail has been researched from several perspectives providing different views on this new emerging communication genre. As Baron (2008) states, “Like typewriters and landline phones before them, computers and mobile phones convey language. But what does language itself look like?”. In this study the analysis of the corpus is based on the frequency of occurrence of the features of the involved written, but conceptual oral language taking into account Baron’s, David Crystal’s and Gimmenez’s methodology.

### 4. Data analysis

The analysis is based on 175 business e-mails. The researcher deals with many features to shed light on this new medium of communication.

#### 4.1. Identification of the e-mails length

Length of e-mails varies according to the purpose of the message. According to Louhaila’s and Kankaanranta’s (2008) framework “the communicative purpose dominating the messages was used as the main criterion”. The study identified three overall e-mail genres, namely the notice board, postman and dialogue genres. The dialogue genre is used to exchange information about corporate activities. The postman genre concerns the delivery of other documents for information and/or comments, and the notice board genre is to inform employees about work place issues. The analysis reveals that e-mails perform different functions, and that they are not restricted to the transfer of information; they appeal for action in a business context.

#### **Example one: Dialogue e-mail**

Hi

Despite our message to u, still SHORTSHIPPED containers not yet included to the list. Pls confirm that loading will be done.

It is highly important for us to get them loaded, it is not a favour to o client or priority request, but those two containers were short shipped and if not loaded client cannot clear his goods and will claim extra charge (storage, custom’s fees ...) to be paid by the company. So pls assist.

Rgds

#### **Example two: Notice board**

Dear.....

Please note that the customer advised that the consignee will pay the charges as his agreement with the shipper, and if the consignee informed you this through the mail or through any other official way please provide us with it to forward it to the customer to check it with the shipper.

Thanks & Best Regards

#### 4.2. Salutations and farewells in business e-mails

Table 1. Salutations in e-mails

Kinds of Salutations	Number of e-mails	Percentage
Hi (informal)	43	24.75%
Hi +name (informal)	20	11.42%
Name,	13	7.42%
Dear,	07	4%
Dear+name	32	18.23%
Dear Madame/Sir	1	0.57%
Good Day		
Morning	36	20.57%
Afternoon		
Evening		
Hello	03	01.72%
No Salutation	20	11.42%

There are different salutations in the business e-mails used in the company. The frequency of these salutations varies over 175 e-mails. The most frequent salutation is ‘Hi’; it shows the informal style that the use of e-mail imposes. The electronic discourse demands the user to be rapid and this salutation permits to move directly to write what is most important. Another salutation that occupies the second position in the frequency of use: “good” followed by day/ morning/ afternoon/ evening. This kind of salutation is a characteristic of spoken discourse rather than the written one. It is generally used in face-to-face communication, but it is written and transferred via electronic device. Through the analysis one notices the use of a formal salutation ‘Dear + name’, it takes the third position. It is a traditional greeting that is relevant to the business letter. However, it is frequent in e-mails since 32 instances (18.28%) are spotted in the analyzed corpus. The use of ‘Hi + name’ and the name of the receiver without any title belong approximately to the same frequency. The use of such a salutation depends on the relationship established between the sender and the receiver. ‘Dear madam/sir’ is a very formal salutation used in business letter, but it is almost rare in e-mails. Through the findings the researcher noticed that salutation can be omitted since 20 (11.24%) e-mails are free of any salutation.

Table 2. Farewells in business e-mails

Kinds of Farewells	Number of e-mails	Percentage
Brgds (informal)	64	36.51
Regards	33	18.86%
Thks regards (mixture formal/informal)	26	14.86%
Kind warm/ best regards	21	12%
Thanks in advance, best regards	16	9.14%
Thks	4	2.28%
No farewells	11	6.29%

Regarding farewells, they are more frequent than salutations since they are omitted in 11 e-mails (6.29%). Unlike salutations, they are omitted in 20 e-mails (11.42%). As “E-mail senders tend to use more words for the closing than for the salutations” (Horowitz and Barchillon, 1994). The most frequent formula is “brgds”. It is an abbreviated formula that stands for ‘Best Regards’; there are 64 instances (36.51%). On the other hand, there are full

formulae such as “Thanks in advance, best regards”, 16 instances, “Kind warm/best regards”, 21 instances and “Regards” 33 instances. These kinds of farewells represent approximately 40% of the frequency. These findings show that the user of business e-mail is trying to adapt “e-mails” to the traditional rules of business writing.

#### 4.3. Upper and lower case spelling in e-mails

Correct upper and lower case was found in 124 e-mails 70.85%. This result showed that both upper and lower case letters were used appropriately. Capital letters were used for names of particular people, places and organizations; even the first singular pronoun “I” was capitalized. These features were appropriate to business letter.

Table 3. Inconsistent use of capitalization and lower case

Case	Number of Words	Percentage
Lower case instead of upper case	76	34.70%
Upper case instead of lower case	03	1.38%
Upper case for emphasis	140	63.92%

Inconsistent use of capitalization and lower case was spot in 51 e-mails. Of those 219 words which were wrong in terms of case, 34.75% contain lower case instead of upper letters and 1.38% upper case instead of lower case letters. In 140 words (63.92%) upper case letters were used in order to emphasize. In speaking, we transform intentions, thought, feelings into fluently articulated speech by the combination of tone units and prosodic units. We show and transmit a mood, intentions and state of mind. We need to show the same features in electronic communication, so upper case conveys intonation. This latter is one of the paralinguistic means through which we can grasp what is important and essential.

Example:

... The planned stay over (omitted) for 3 weeks for feeder connection is **UNACCEPTABLE**. What client requires is connection to the earliest feeder available to (omitted).

#### 4.4. Different kinds of abbreviations

Table 4. Different kinds of abbreviations

Kinds of Abbreviations	Number of words	Percentage
Acronyms	79	27.62%
Consonant Spelling	124	43.35%
Letters and number homophones	17	5.94 %
Others	21	7.34%

The use of abbreviations w a frequent phenomenon and allowed in the business e-mails written by the employees of this shipping company. Based on the analyzed corpus, the abbreviations used were divided into three main categories: acronyms, consonant spelling, and letter and number homophones.

The acronyms stood for specific terms relevant to the shipping company and its different activities; they also represented the documents used to provide the service as: Bill of Lading (BL); Heavy Lift Vessel (HLV); Global Customer Service System (GCSS). Among the 286 abbreviated words, acronyms appeared 79 times.

Consonant spelling was the most frequent kind of abbreviations. Over 286 abbreviated words, we spotted 124 instances. Letter and number homophones were repeated in use 17 times.

Example one: Acronyms and Consonant Spelling

**PIs** note tt the **BL** in attached file will arrive today and both cnee and notify are marked as ‘**GFT**’ which is **NVOCC**.

Have contacted **GFT** to get the final receiver of the goods, but they replied to us **tt** they are no longer the agent of (omitted).

Example two: Letter and Number Homophones

Have asked the customer n we **R** waiting **4** the **BL**

Besides these three categories, other kinds of abbreviations were spotted. The researcher did not design a specific category because these abbreviations neither were part of letters and number homophones nor of consonant spelling. They consist of vowels and consonants; they are used 21 times.

Through this analysis one notices that the use of Mediated Computer Communication imposes a specific style of writing that will shape the characteristics of such a medium. Since e-mails require speed, the use of abbreviations compensate for not being able to speak fast enough. Biber (1995) asserts that “analysis of registers such as e-mails would enable consideration of the functional and linguistic characteristics associated with new communication technologies”.

4.5. Syntactic reduction

Table 5. Syntactic reductions

Ellipses	Number	Percentage
Conjunction	39	22.28%
Subject pronouns	40	22.85%
Copula deletion	14	8%

The lack of coordinating or subordinating conjunctions results in asyndetic sentences. They are considered as a feature of economy and as such resemble brief notes. Among 175 e-mails, there was a case of 39 asyndetic sentences (i.e., the deletion of conjunctions and substituted with an appropriate punctuation which implies the function). Linking words were omitted. Yet, the message remained understandable since readers could fill in the missing semantic information. The omission of several parts of a sentence could occur; it reinforced the spoken aspect as Young Yan (2000) refers to “these ellipses reinforce the spoken touch in e-mails.” The most common occurrences were the deletion of subject pronouns 22.85%. Censoring the “I” permitted the reduction of personal involvement and shows that the matter did not concern the person herself but it was a matter of business.

Example : subject pronoun deletion

- ...will keep you informed on the progress.
- ...will instruct our team to use correct code.
- ...have found 17 failed messages on E-view.
- ...have checked with my colleagues and she forwarders the mail to me

4.6. Conjunctions in e-mails

Table 6. Conjunctions in e-mails

Conjunctions	Number	Percentage
Asyndetic	39	22.28%
Coordinating	76	44.42%
Subordinating	60	34.28%

As it is a characteristic of unplanned discourse, sentences in e-mails are of simple sequence and the use of the coordinating conjunction “and” was the most frequent 24%, on the other hand, coordinating conjunction ‘but’ was less frequent, it occurs less than half as often as ‘and’.

Regarding the subordinating conjunctions, they are considered as a characteristic of informational discourse. Yet, there were two types of subordinations that were typical of unplanned and involved discourse: the causative and conditional subordinations. In the analyzed corpus we found that causative subordinating were almost as frequent as conditional subordinations (9: 71%; 10: 85%). They were the dominant ones compared to other subordinating conjunctions which represent (13: 71%; 20: 56% of all subordinating sentences are made up of causative or conditional conjunctions. They can be considered as markers of stance, justification for actions (as, because) or conditions for actions that are frequent cases in business.

Example: coordinating cases

Pls proceed to amend booking **and** provide required information.

Cargo cab suffer auctioned or another destruction process **because of** the long lay over at destination

Pls note tt the manifest should be submitted to customs and if final consignee not updated on GCSS and vessel arrives, we can’t discharge the unit.

#### 4.7. Modal verbs in e-mails

Table 7. Modal verbs in e-mails

Modals	Number	Percentage
Permission/possibility/Ability		
Can	45	27.95%
Could	13	8.66%
Obligation /Necessity		
Have to	03	1.86%
Must	02	2.48%
Need to	06	3.72%
Should	19	11.80%
Volition		
Be going to	1	0.62%
Shall	1	0.62%
Will	62	38.5%
would	09	5.59%

Over 175 e-mails, the researcher found that modal verbs were frequent in use, they appeared 161 times. These modal verbs were headlined under three categories (1-permission/ possibility/ability), (2- obligation/necessity), and (3- volition/prediction). The modal verbs that were equally common in use were prediction modals (44.09%) as well as permission/possibility/ability modals (36.01%). The most typical modals of conversation according to Biber (1999) are *can /could* besides *will/would*.

Among less frequent obligation/ necessity modals, these were mirrored in the analyzed corpus as it was illustrated in Table 7. The modal verbs changed the mood of a sentence and allow you to sound polite and diplomatic. They also made you sound less definite and more open to other people’s ideas. They were used to make a request and give instructions; these were frequent tasks in business communication.

Formal English frequently uses modal verbs *would/ could*. The employees in this company tended to be more relaxed in their business communication. Since they belong to the same discourse community and use 'e-mails' as a means of communication, this medium tends to impose a specific style that is not appropriate for the most formal kinds of writing.

## 5. Pedagogical recommendations

The corpus based analysis reveals that a new discourse of business communication is developing. More and more people are getting connected to internet and using it as a tool for communication, but unlike more traditional forms of communication such as letters or the telephone, they have not grown up with it. So, each new user who embarks on this form of communication needs to know not only how to communicate effectively but also the norms that give such communication the characteristics that allow it to be correctly interpreted by its different users. Moreover, people whose native languages are varied find themselves in a forum where the overwhelming language used is English. They need to learn not only the norms for a form of communication that is new for them, but also how to do it in a second or foreign language.

The analysis performed in this research enables English for Specific Purposes teachers designing language programmes concerning Business English courses. Over the last few years, the e-mails have started to have a huge impact on our professional life. Business Correspondence is depending more than ever on electronic technology. This phenomenon is illustrated through the high shift from the use of e-mail, and the efficiency of this latter as many business purposes (requests, orders, shipments, complaints, etc.) as the business letters do. The analysis of e-mail discourse is a contribution to solve linguistic and pedagogical problems in English teaching at the faculties of Economics and Management in Algeria. Therefore, this research suggests that the increasing use of e-mails in contemporary business world should be reflected in the content of Business English courses.

The use of e-mails in teaching Business English is considered as an authentic material that 'take more account of sociological frame- of audience status old/new relationships, cultural expectations' (Dudley Evans & St John, 1998:185). In addition, using e-mails as a pedagogical tool solves a crucial problem in teaching English, that of students' lack of motivation and of interest. Using e-mails in learning would attract the students' attention and boost their motivation. Since students are acquainted with the use of e-mails, they would find it as a self-monitoring task rather than an instruction. Authentic business situations will allow the students to access the role of interaction partners and 'ideas generators'. The focus is primarily on using language to do something. It is the outcome of the task which is important, just as in the business world. The language is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis, based on the corpus that consists of 175 business e-mails, reveals features that make up the pattern of business e-mail; it also shows that the electronic channel has an impact on the choice of the language exponents. A wide range of abbreviations that were represented in letter and number homophones and consonant spelling was found frequently. Syntactic reductions as the deletion of subject pronoun and conjunctions have a space in these e-mails. The function which the language serves is considered as a factor of variation in language use. The e-mail has assumed function which is in some cases associated with spoken language and other cases associated with formal writing.

The e-mail as a new emerging medium is a new type of discourse; it is a discourse that is developing its own language, a language that is suitable for the immediacy of real time written communication. It is still developing its own systematic rules, principles and standards; it is more than a channel, it is a communication culture of its own. Language copes with new functions; this is the case of computer based media, they promote variations in language use and place demands often associated with spoken language on the production of written language.

With the development of e-mail as a central tool for the workplace communication, it requires new form of competence in addressing multiple participants. The aim of this research was therefore two-fold; it first identified the most relevant features which emerge from studies in the language of business e-mails. It then explored different possible pedagogical applications of these findings in Business English classes.



However, this research is an attempt to bridge the gap between the Algerian university and the workplace that is considered as a ‘target needs’. To conclude, this research does not offer definite answers, but rather a starting point for what the researcher hopes will be an active and continuing dialogue between practitioners and professionals.

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