



ISSN: 0975-833X

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE LANGUAGE OF EMAILS: IS IT RESEMBLING MORE THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE OR THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 20th April, 2015
Received in revised form
01st May, 2015
Accepted 26th June, 2015
Published online 31st July, 2015

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present paper is to identify the differences of the spoken language and written language and based on these to try to see which of those features are applied to email messages. By means of a detailed analysis of the proper characteristics of spoken language and written language, and also analysis of some emails as samples, it is concluded that the emerging language of emails do resemble more the features of the spoken language than those of written language. Evidence do show that those new features represented in emails, as a new type of language, require a deep analysis.

Key words:

Spoken language, Written language, Email.

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Citation: Salvador Bautista-Maldonado, Marla Pérez-Barriga and Santa del Carmen Herrera-Sánchez, 2015. "The language of emails: Is it resembling more the spoken language or the written language?", *International Journal of Current Research*, 7, (7), 18730-18735.

INTRODUCTION

El principal objetivo de este artículo es identificar y analizar las diferencias existentes entre el lenguaje hablado y el lenguaje escrito, y basado en este análisis tratar de identificar que tipo de lenguaje es utilizado en los correos electrónicos. A través de un análisis detallado sobre las características del lenguaje hablado y del lenguaje escrito, y de algunos ejemplos de correo electrónico, se concluye que este nuevo lenguaje de los correos electrónicos, se asemeja más a las características que presenta el lenguaje hablado. Así como también, se enfatiza que este nuevo tipo de lenguaje emergente necesita ser analizado con más detalle.

1. Setting the differences between Written and spoken language

When we learn to speak our own language, we learn to do it in an automatic and natural way and then learning to write comes after, but somebody must teach us how to write, it is not natural. For many years people have regarded writing as superior to speaking and so putting writing in a higher status, perhaps because in the past almost everybody could speak but only a few people could write. But as we shall see modern influences are changing the relative status of speaking and writing.

The purpose of this article is to set the characteristics of the written language and the spoken language and then to analyze some emails and try to see what kind of language they resemble more.

For years it has been noticed that scholars (Halliday, 1985; McCarthy, 1991; Cook, 2004; among others) have been trying to set the characteristics of written language as a separate topic from spoken language. However, those scholars do always reach to a conclusion that they are both interrelated since spoken language requires written language and written language requires spoken language as much as almost the same dichotomy process product. In the past, linguists suggested that writing was just a way for recording language by means of visible marks (Bloomfield, 1933); De Saussure (as cited in Baskin, 1960) also suggested that the purpose of writing was just to represent the oral language.

Recent opinions suggest that written language never was, and never has been, conversation written down. It is only very recently, since the invention of the tape recorder, that we have been able to make written transcriptions of natural spontaneous speech; and it is very clear that they are not what writing is about. The main purpose of writing down speech, in fact, is to enable us to study speech; it is certainly not to provide a model of what written language ought to look like (Halliday, 1985). Being Halliday one of the first scholars who tried to set the

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characteristics of spoken language and written language. In the same line of research Abercrombie (1965) states about the difference between spoken and written language:

The letters in which normally language is written do not represent more than a part of spoken language. Writing, of course, is perfectly intelligible without these missing ingredients. But then writing is a medium for language in its own right, and though it is, in the last analysis, constructed on the basis of spoken language, the aim of writing is not, usually, to represent actual spoken utterances which have occurred. (Abercrombie, 1965, p. 36)

So spoken and written language have certain characteristics which make them different to each other. According to Cook (2004) one characteristic that makes spoken and written different is that spoken language has a different channel of communication, which means that it implies the use of movements of the muscles of the mouth and lungs and to understand a spoken sentence implies the use of the ears, so a speaker produces a sound and somebody else hears it and may respond to it. On the other hand, written language implies the use of fingers and hand movements in a coordinate way in order to produce a visual piece of message in paper or in a computer screen. Not taking into consideration the cognitive processes of both, this first difference seems to be physical.

The second difference is related to lexical complexity. Written language has more lexical complexity than spoken language. To understand this is necessary to make a distinction between lexical items and grammatical items first. Lexical items are often called "content words", so they are called items rather than words since they can consist of more than one word, phrasal verbs for example. These are lexical since they function in lexical sets and not in grammatical systems. In contrast, grammatical items, "function words", only contrast with one dimension and cannot accept more items, example of this are prepositions (Halliday, 1985). Also, Cook (2004) emphasizes that content words have meaning and can be looked up in a dictionary, mainly nouns. And function words such as conjunctions, prepositions, articles, only mark the structure of a sentence and make sense in terms of grammatical rules. So, taking this into consideration Both Halliday and Cook conclude that written language presents more content words than function words in virtually all written texts. (For a wider explanation between the differences with content words and lexical words see Radford 2004, 2009).

The third difference consists on that spoken language has a first draft status and written language has a final draft status. Written language, in most cases, is a planned and edited product, it needs to pass for a process before the final edition. By contrast, spoken language is unrehearsed and not planned, except in some cases in political speeches and when people rephrase messages immediately after they utter them (Cook, 2004). The fourth difference consists on permanency. Writing is permanent waiting to be read by someone, it exists in space and time. And spoken language is not permanent, it is said and then it is gone, it only exists for a moment. The only thing to make it permanent is recording it and transcribing it but this is not the case here as suggested by Halliday (1985) in the sense

that spoken language is spoken language even if it is presented to us in a form of transcription.

The fifth difference is situational. For instance, in the spoken language the use of pronouns may refer to people who are present or not such as when we are watching a TV program, we make comments about we are watching and it is not necessary more explanations since the context –situation– explains it by itself. But in written language both writer and reader are obligated to create the situation.

In relation to grammar, verbs tend to be in full form in writing rather than contracted; writing uses the passive voice. A written sentence begins with capital letter and ends with a full stop. Spoken language tends to be analyzed as part of larger units such as conversations and exchanges. Leech *et al* (as cited in Cook, 2004) display some of the frequency characteristics of written and spoken English (see APPENDIX 1). They found that *singular common nouns, general adjectives, articles, plural common nouns and singular proper nouns* are more able to occur in written and personal pronouns *I, you, it*, the preposition *of* and *base verbs* are able to occur in spoken language.

What is more, writing does not incorporate all the features of speech, since there are various aspects of spoken language that do not have counterpart in writing: rhythm, intonation, degree of loudness, variation in voice quality, pausing, and phrasing—as well as indexical features by which we recognize that it is Peter talking not Joe, the individual characteristics of a particular person's speech (Halliday, 1985).

Summing up, spoken language and written language have got their own characteristics that make them different but not separated. Halliday (1985) stated that in the past when new demands are made on language so the language changes in response to them, as in the centuries after the age of Chaucer in English, now that once again we are making language work for us in ways it never had to do before, it will have to become a different language in order to cope with our current culture and technology, and Cook supports this idea stating that the English writing system has had to adapt to changing circumstances such as e-mails, chat-rooms and text messages (Cook, 2004).

2. The special characteristics of emails

Having set the differences between spoken language and written language now we are going to set some characteristics of email messages. Electronic communication is here to stay, and its use is increasing rapidly. The global economy is expanding. New technologies are developing at near frenzied rates. The use of the internet continues to explode. People are connecting more now than ever in history and communicating through such an increase of electronic devices, and email is one of the most common way people are connecting. But what is email? And what characteristics does it have?

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines email as a way of sending messages and data to other people by means of computers connected together in a network. Also, Teeler and Gray (2000) define email as the electronic postal service. In

the same line Cook (2004) defines email as a message entered into a computer from a keyboard and then transmitting it to a recipient by some electronic means and then reading it on a monitor screen.

Terminello and Reed (2003) suggest that an email message should contain the following five standard components: header (*To:*, *Cc:*, *Subject:* and *Attach*), greeting (such as *Mr*, *hello*, *dear*, etc.), body (*the message*), closing (*sincerely*, *regards*, *bye*, etc.) and signature (this signature should contain personal information about the sender, information such as full name, charge, telephone number, home address, web page, etc). What is more, Crystal (2001) adds one more element, apart from the mentioned above, the date which is inserted automatically by the software.

Flynn and Flynn (2000) propose five rules for writing an email message: i) *Write as though Mum were reading*, which means write to the widest audience imaginable, to be specific and write our message just as if our boss, the media or Mum were reading; ii) *Think big picture*, to write specifically, even technically, if the situation calls for it, provide a brief summary at the beginning of the document. This summary serves for two purposes: a) any reader regardless of technical training will understand the message and b) since the summary is written in conversational language and appears at the beginning of the document it may have a better chance of getting the interest of a reader who may not want to get into a complex document; iii) *Keep an eye on spelling, grammar and punctuation* because it is sure that the reader will notice it; iv) *Do not use email to let off steam*, if you are angry about something try to compose yourself before compose your message and never use obscene, abusive or otherwise offensive language and v) *Do not send to the world*, only send the message to the appropriate and strictly to those who need to read it.

Crystal (2001) argues that the clarity of the message involves both legibility and intelligibility. Legibility refers to ways of avoiding a screenful of unbroken text, using short and simple sentences, however, there is no guarantee that the produced message on the writer's screen will have the same configuration on the reader's. Crystal argues that more than 100 characters in one line will have an erratic sequence in the receivers screen and suggests that 80 or 70 characters for line will not cause any problem but special formatting such as bold and italic typefaces may be lost in transmission. Intelligibility refers to the speed and spontaneity with which e-mails can be written and sent in this communicative domain. Misspellings is the best example, they occur regardless of the educational background of the writer and these errors cause a little or no disruption in the communicative process. Moreover, other spelling errors can make a reader pause, or make an utterance ambiguous or unintelligible but they are rare and hardly any interfere with the meaning as Crystal (2001) states:

For every grammar mistake in an email message there are an average of three spelling mistakes. If you think you're saving time not correcting spelling errors, think again. The time saved not checking your spelling is multiplied by the time that it takes for a reader to decipher the misspelled words.

Misspelled words jar your reader's concentration by diverting attention away from the idea you are expressing. Not only are misspellings annoying and confusing, they also cause the reader to question your credibility. Misspellings make you look sloppy or, worse yet, incompetent. (Crystal, 2001).

What is more, much of the graphological deviance (i.e. *hellllloooooo!*) noted in email messages is also not universal, being typical of informal internet exchanges specially among younger users. There is also a reduced use of capitalization which may involve grammar or lexicon, or both. Punctuation expressiveness may be seriously extended such as in: *Yes!!!!!!*, *WHAT?????*. Also emoticons or smileys are available for use. These are combinations of keyboard characters design to show an emotional facial expression: they are typed in sequence on a single line and placed after the final punctuation mark of a sentence. Almost all of them are read sideways. Examples: *:)* pleasure or humour, *:(* (sadness or dissatisfaction), *;-)* user is a punk, etc. These were invented as a simple way to express intention (Teeler and Gray, 2000).

Increasingly, email is replacing the telephone, not to mention the traditional letter, for two-person social discourse. Given pricing and ease of access, even people with no computer skills are finding that email is often both less expensive and more convenient than traditional phone calls (Baron, 2000). And also she argues that email initially emerged as a point-to-point conversational device. Although, other broadcast forms of transmission dominated computer-mediated communication for nearly two decades, point-to-point dialogue has become by far the most common use of CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication).

According to Terminello and Reed (2003) a good email message should have 10 (ten) "C"s and these Cs are as follows: (i) Clear so that the purpose of the message is not hidden or buried; (ii) Concise and collapsed and does not use extra words or business-speak; (iii) Correct and contains accurate names, dates and details; (iv) Conscious of the recipient's needs and mindful of the image projected; (v) Complete enough to require a follow-up communication because something was left out; (vi) Considerate and shows thought for the person on the other side of the communication; (vii) Courteous, uses a polite tone, and is an example of excellent Netiquette; (viii) Consistent about how information is presented, how people are addressed, and how salutations and closings are expressed; (ix) Concrete and firmly and openly states the required action and (x) Connecting to strengthen relationships and build goodwill.

Crystal (2001) concludes that an email is a medium of communication with all its wide range of stylistic expressiveness, from formal to informal, just as others mediums have to come to do, and where the pressure on users will be to display stylistic consistency, in the same way that this is required in other forms of writing. Then email will take its place in the school curriculum as a medium which offers a further domain within which children can develop their ability to consolidate their stylistic intuitions and make responsible linguistic choices.

3. Analysis of sample emails

After having done a slight review of the characteristics of written, spoken language and the characteristics of email let's analyze some examples which were kindly provided to us from some friends. Note that in most examples some personal information was changed to keep the privacy of the people who kindly send us those emails (even though they were informed that those emails were for publishing reasons).

SAMPLE 1

Hi Girl:

Great to get the little tidbits from you. Unfortunately I cannot open this one.

How are you? How is work and the love life like these days? I am back at school as I hope you are too. It's either that I am getting older -"bite your tongue"- and wiser, or the students are getting younger and a lot less informed. I have six classes so you can imagine that takes some getting used to. Let me know how you are doing and how is good old Vancouver treating you.

Love

Hyacinth

SAMPLE 2

Klare

Thanks for the reply

We went to Calgary for xmas we went to lake louise and skied what a great day we had we came back for new years and then we flew to Cody Wy. to my nieces wedding she is 19 Echo is the middle daughter of my sister Nora with the 11 children we had a great time now I must get off to work Triple shift sounds too harsh to me lets have tea and catch up call meseee yeah

Tim

SAMPLE 3

Thought this was worth passing along, so we can do some research

before we forward stuff. Thanks to my cousin, we now have this valuable resource.

Kind regards, Lauren

SAMPLE 4

hey babe! sorry you are having a bad couple of days 😞...but im fairly confident that things will start looking up 😊 im really excited to hang out with you tonight. our schedules have been so hectic lately that i feel like i never get to see anyone and my computer is becoming my best friend...pathetic, huh?

Well, what do you want to do, i have to go into town to go to P&C anyway, so we can stop by the cafe or what not watch a movie, or bachlorette..WHATEVER! idont care, as long as i have you next me.

love ya Margie,

Sharon

SAMPLE 5

Hi Rebeca,

I need a favour please!!!!

I need someone to make a deposit in my bank account. It can be 1 penny, or 2 pence, the value doesn't matter.

Could you be so kind as to do this for me??? I'll pay you back :)

My details are:

account # 123456789

sort code 112233

Lloyds TSB

If you do the deposit, can you just email me to let me know the date and value please. If you can't, just let me know by email.

Hugs

Sue

SAMPLE 6

Kim Palmquist<pryn18_14800@yahoo.com> wrote:

> Margie,

>

> You're so cute. Don't worry about a thing. sam told

> me to make up that part about the check bouncing so

> that people would send the check. i already have the

> rooms on my debit card, so if u want to pay me cash

> when we get there that's fine. just one less trip to

> the ATM when we get to mexico. i'm so sorry to hear

> your mom's purse was stolen!! ifi was in the fbi

> now, i'd hunt him/her down. haha other than that, i

> hope you had a great holiday :) see ya in a few

> days!!

> Kim :)

SAMPLE 7

Dear Robert,

Tuition Fees 2012/2013 - £9960.00.

Your fees are still unpaid by your Sponsor ABC. Can you please contact them to see when we will be paid. I have sent reminders myself and as to date not heard from them. I would appreciate if you could let me know the outcome as soon as possible. I must remind you, your fees are your responsibility and if your Sponsor fails to pay, we will have to charge you personally the amount of £9960.00.

Mrs S Callagan

Income Office, Finance Section

University of Edinburg

The first two examples were written by teachers from Canada and as we can see their vocabulary is not informal, though not too formal, their greetings are informal. The first example makes very good use of punctuation but the second one has no punctuation at all. Also, in the second example there is an example of graphological deviance when the writer exaggerates *Triple shift sounds too harsh...* Both closings are informal. Both examples have more characteristics of spoken language than those of written and just because the topic here is to analyze emails one can argue that if those pieces of written were presented in a different way, such as an informal personal letter sent via surface (by normal post) they will have more characteristics of a written language. So it can be said that both examples are in-between spoken and written language.

The example number three does not have greetings and lacks of an overt subject (I) in the first sentence. She uses specific

expressions related to email (passing along). Punctuation and the closing are good. Again this could be stated as a sample representing spoken language. Though it can be argued that it is a kind of "telegraphic" written language if this email were analyzed isolated and not in the context that is being treated in this paper.

Example number four is the best one to take into consideration as an email which represents all the characteristics of this kind of messages. Informality in the greeting, use of emoticons, using a different tag question (huh?) instead of isn't?, not using capital letters in necessary contexts but using them as a way of shouting (WHATEVER!). This message was written by an undergraduate student from New York, USA. Taking this as the best example of representing spoken language.

The example number five seems that a kind of desperation message since the writer uses a lot of exclamation and question marks in sign that this is an urgent message may be. Also uses emoticons and an informal closing. This message was from a postgraduate student to another postgraduate student in the Language and Linguistics Department at Essex, University, UK.

The example number six a forwarded example and the vocabulary is really informal. Good use of punctuation but not use of capital letters. She only used capital letters when expressing the cash machine (ATM) but no with FBI. She acted weird and sarcastic or funny may be. She also used emoticons and informal closing. The thing why we decided to use this example is because the use of this symbol (>). This symbol was a convention revival from the past and now used when we reply a message by email. It appears by default in order to let know that we are replying from the previous message (the original one). This message was replied by an undergraduate student from New York, USA. It is not possible to pronounce the symbol used here (>) being this symbol the only characteristic of written language but the text, the message, is far less formal. In conclusion, this example is another excellent example of spoken language.

The example number 7 is a formal email message that seems that it was written off-line. This is a very formal way of addressing people in formal situations. The language provided in this email is more resembling written language. It shows no grammatical errors, and the punctuation seems fine in relation to the standards of academic English writing. It seems to suggest that this is the only example of an edited email composed previously (off-line) which contains all the proper and formal characteristics of written language.

4. Discussion of the analysis of the previous emails

As seen in this analysis the first five examples resemble more spoken than written and only the last email resemble a little bit written language. Also, Cook (2004) states that email resembles spoken language rather than written in some respects, for example in having texts without subject pronouns and verb-less expressions. Also, he emphasizes that many users treat email writing as first-draft and hardly bother to tidy it up

before sending. As many of the examples provided in section 3.

Halliday (1985) stated in the past when new demands are made on language so the language changes in response to them, as in the centuries after the age of Chaucer in English, now that once again we are making language work for us in ways it never had to do before, it will have to become a different language in order to cope with our current culture and technology, and Cook supports this idea stating that the English writing system has had to adapt to changing circumstances such as emails, chat-rooms and text messages (Cook, 2004).

Baron (2000) observes that email is replacing increasingly, in business and academic environments, other traditional function of memos and letters, and she argues that the most important thing of an email is the editing stage and one likely resolution is that two distinct styles of email will emerge, one that is *informal*, and often unedited, and other that is *formal*, and edited, comparable to the ranges of style that already exist in speech and writing. Finally, she concludes by saying that email is part speech and part writing. But also email has emerged as a medium that allows communication in situations where neither speech nor writing can easily substitute for example the smiley or emoticons, such as example number 4 from section 3.

Moreover, Herring (1996) states that CMC is more like written language with respect to vocabulary use (textual), more like spoken language with respect to the use personal pronouns (interpersonal), and makes greater use of modal auxiliaries (ideational) than either speech or writing. In addition, Collot and Belmore (1996) comment that messages delivered electronically are neither spoken nor written language in the conventional sense of these words. Even there is interaction between them, but cannot be labelled as spoken messages since the participants neither see nor hear each other, nor can be considered strictly written since many of them are composed directly on-line, thereby ruling out the use of planning and editing strategies which are at the disposal of even the most informal writer.

Supporting the previous idea, Dudeney (2007) also proposes that emails are just like simple text documents, which can be sent over the net. For him, email messages are usually small and written in a "shorthand" fashion ignoring the normal conventions of written language. More recently, Goddard and Geesin (2011) suggest that email messages do show similar kind of interactivity than those of text messages, in other words, the language used in emails and text messages are more "conversation-like" and that is why so often people call text messages and email as "hybrids" or "mixture" in the use of language: "it can be interactive like speech, while being written using keyboard strokes" (Goddard and Geesin, 2011)

5. Conclusion, limitations and directions for further research

After analyzing the characteristics of the written and spoken language, the characteristics of email and some examples it is concluded that email resembles more spoken language but not

in its totally because this new kind of writing has its own proper characteristics, part speech and part written, which need to be analyzed deeply. Since technology is a change of flux and modern ways to communicate are changing people's behavior and attitudes to communicate to each other too, but in this paper it has been shown that emails represent -in a way- more spoken language than written language, the only way for emails to represent written language is when they are processed off-line and sent the text attached to the message. Crystal (2001) defines the online language as a new specie of interaction "a third medium" of communication, besides written and oral forms of English, and this genuine third medium has its own systematic rules to suit new circumstances where grammar is gone and spelling is superfluous.

This article dealt only with emails and due to personal reasons, as a limitation in this paper, no more samples of emails were included since the users did not provide any consent to include more samples of their personal messages, which would be great to analyze a bigger variety and provide more evidence supporting the spoken language as the major source for writing and sending messages via electronic devices. The directions for future research are to analyze the new trends in electronic communications such as those new applications on mobile phones, those in specific applications where the users can combine both voice and written texts such as Whatsapp, Wechat, skype and the plain written texts in chats via Facebook and Messenger (now Outlook) and messages sent via twitter to cite some. There is a lot to do but this needs to be done quickly as the new technologies are changing rapidly. Apart from analyzing the written messages researchers can also get into the analysis of other features of electronic messages such as the genre, formal and informal, the use of the so called mignions, studies about borrowing lexical terms directly from English, and the lost of identities of the users among others.

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APPENDIX 1

Frequency of the top 10 most differentiated categories per million words in the British National Corpus for spoken and written English. (Data source: Leech *et al.*, 2001) Taken from Cook, 2004, p. 41


