Written conversations or spoken letters?
A multilingual approach to the linguistic and pragmatic features of e-mails

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Abstract

This paper puts forward a continuum-based approach to e-mails and a parameter-based description of their linguistic and pragmatic features. E-mails could be regarded as a hybrid of speech and writing, or rather as a creolising modality, since some of them are developing their own features. A corpus of business (academic) and personal e-mails in both Spanish and Catalan supports this continuum-based view and verifies the existence of the above features of e-mail outside “e-mail English”.

**Key words:** continuum, e-mail, hybrid, speech, writing

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the characteristics of e-mail so as to grasp the essence of this electronic modality of communication. In agreement with authors like Devitt (1993) or Bolaños et al. (2004), the view of e-mail put forward here is based on the notion of “genre” understood as a dynamic construct which evolves with society and technology. Likewise, and following Biber (1988) and Baron (1998), “spectral” or continuum-based relationships and models of representation will be preferred to classical dichotomies, in the belief that they provide a more accurate description of the modality and its instantiations.

The features of e-mail

Considering Lyons’s (1977) list of the components of context (knowledge of role and status, spatial and temporal location, formality level, medium, subject and register), it could be posited that in e-mails at least part (and sometimes most) of this knowledge is either absent, or not sufficiently specified, or not agreed on by both sender and receiver. Contextual indeterminacy could therefore explain some of the features of the modality, particularly those related to style.

The most frequently quoted feature of e-mail is its informal tone, although it must be kept in mind that, as Crystal (2001) observes, style is very often determined by the correspondent’s behaviour, and also that the same participant may change the style to suit different communicative needs. As regards format, the structure of e-mails includes a series of fixed elements in the same way as conventional letters or memos. The computer software, if required, provides some data by default. Following the style of traditional letter writing, the body of the message usually contains an opening formula, a pre-closing formula, and the identification of the sender (ID), which can be automatically added by the program as a “signature block”.


E-mails have some features in common with other modalities of CMC such as conferences, BBSs, or MUDs. According to Sproull and Kiesler (1986) they are all fast (like speech), text-based (like writing) and prototypically asynchronous (also like writing). Drawing on “spectral models”, Baron (1989) provides an excellent account of the main modalities of CMC in terms of their proximity to prototypical (“traditional”) writing or prototypical (“face-to-face”) speech. Figure 1 below is a simplified version of Baron’s “spectral relationships”:

FIGURE 1. Spectral analysis of CMC (adapted from Baron, 1998: 143)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Traditional) Writing</th>
<th>Face-to-face Speech</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posting</td>
<td>Joint Composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web page Electronic journal</td>
<td>Collaborative paper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 below displays a parameter-based description of e-mail in relation to face-to-face speech and letter writing (the subgenre of writing which is closer to e-mail). The description is based on Baron’s (1998), Gains’s (1999) and Crystal’s (2001) accounts, and considers the participants, the message, the channel and the context. Shaded cells mark the typical values for e-mails.

TABLE 1. Parameter-based description of e-mails

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters for description</th>
<th>(FACE-TO-FACE) SPEECH</th>
<th>(LETTER) WRITING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical proximity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed of transmission</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible and auditory social cues (that constrain interaction)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durability</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean length</td>
<td>Usually short</td>
<td>Any length</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout (structure)</td>
<td>dialogic structure</td>
<td>Salutation + body + signature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing process</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of formality (style)</td>
<td>Usually low (informal): contractions, loose grammar, subject ellipsis, colloquial abbreviations and acronyms, casual lexicon</td>
<td>Usually high (formal to semi-formal): carefully constructed sentences, no contractions, no ellipsis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Conveyed through stress and intonation</td>
<td>Conveyed through graphological deviance (capitalization, punctuation expressiveness, smileys)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concerning length, Crystal (2001) observes that e-mail messages tend to fit the screen so as to be read quickly. In fact, he reports that 70% of the messages he analysed were 16 lines long or less, personal e-mails being considerably shorter than institutional ones.
In their respective corpus studies, both Gains (1998) and Li Lan (2000) report the use of dialogic devices, which make writing look like oral language. Gains notes the presence of several conversational features in academic e-mails: pause fillers, echo and rhetorical questions, informal vocabulary and extensive clause connection by “and”. The notion of “adjacency pairs” (Levinson, 1983: 303) taken from conversational analysis seems to be relevant here, since both Gains and Crystal also verify that short message responses can take the form of the second utterance in a two-part interaction.

As regards style, Gains (1999) reports that commercial e-mails tend to follow the conventions for written business English, with well-formed and correctly punctuated sentences. Users consistently adopt a formal or semi-formal style, displaying a wider range of styles in personal correspondence. Li Lan (2000) further remarks that abbreviations and creative language are more frequent among young people.

E-mails also seem to display exclusive features. “Potential asymmetry” is a “unique” feature of e-mail communication (Crystal, 2001: 110), since there is no guarantee that the message will be received as it was written. The frequent use of bullets to highlight points in a list is also reported as “an important stylistic feature […] having previously been rare in letters and typewritten documents” (2001: 110). According to Crystal, the lack of an editing process is another exclusive feature of e-mails (although it can alternatively be considered as a feature that brings e-mails closer to speech). Misspellings, punctuation errors or omissions are readily accepted as a natural consequence of the speed and spontaneity inherent in the modality. Lastly, the most interesting characteristic of e-mails is, as Crystal observes, the presence of “message intercalation” or “within-message commenting”. This makes e-mail stylistically deviant from the rule in other domains of writing, since the result of message intercalation is a set of physically adjacent paragraphs which are semantically unrelated.

**The category of e-mail as a continuum**

In line with Baron’s (1998) spectral model, a basic classification of business vs. personal messages as continuous subcategories along the medium writing-speech could be further refined as shown in Figure 2 below.

![Figure 2](image.png)

**FIGURE 2.** The location of the category of e-mails along the continuum of medium

In this way, the category of e-mails is located in a continuum as a modality, and e-mails themselves are similarly distributed considering their purpose and contextual features. In this distribution, only a few business e-mails written in very specific communicative situations (when the sender initiates asynchronous communication, and sender and receiver do not know each other) would be closer to traditional writing, being particularly associated with the subgenre of commercial correspondence. In the same way, some personal e-mails in particular circumstances (very short exchanges in
dialogic form and nearly synchronous) would be in the vicinity of typical face-to-face speech.

Validating the continuum hypothesis: a corpus analysis of e-mails in Spanish and Catalan

This section begins with an overview of several corpus analyses of e-mails whose results will then be compared with those obtained in this study.

In his corpus of 116 e-mails, Gains (1999) reports that only 8% of the commercial messages analysed have an opening, whereas 92% have a closing, which is mainly the sender’s name (42%) or a “thank you” phrase (40%). By contrast, 63% of the academic (personal) e-mails have openings, preferably “Hi” (20%), and “Dear X” (17%), and 91% have closings.

Li Lan (2000) analysed 408 official and personal e-mails, including messages from non-native speakers of English. In contrast with Gains’s results, 45% of the official messages have a greeting, preferably “Dear X” (46%). 75% have a closing, and 34% use the sender’s name. In personal messages, 95% have an opening. The extensive use of closings and openings may be due to the higher level of formality assumed by non-native speakers when they communicate in English.

Lastly, in Crystal’s (2001) corpus analysis of 500 e-mails he reports that the senders of personal e-mails seem considerably influenced by traditional letter writing: they tend to use openings and closings, and openings including “Dear” (+Dear) are slightly more frequent than –Dear formulas. Formal letter-type closings (“Yours sincerely”) are usually avoided.

On these premises, what follows is a summary of the results obtained in the analysis of a corpus of 250 business (academic) and personal e-mails, 207 (82.8%) in Spanish and 43 (17.2%) in Catalan. The analysis was carried out to gather evidence of the universal quality of the features of e-mails and to support the continuum-based account of the modality. The e-mails – labelled Ac (academic) and P (personal) – were divided into five general types (+Ac, +Æ-Ac, -Ac, -P and +P) by considering the features they share with either traditional letter writing or face-to-face speech as regards length, structure and style. The classification was also based on the communicative purpose of the messages and the presence of certain “social context cues” (Sproull and Kiesler, 1986), particularly “situational variables” (age, gender and relationship between participants) and “organisational variables” (status and job category). The main features studied were mean length and opening and closing formulas (frequency and types), and the stylistic devices considered were the use of honorifics (Sp tú vs. usted) and abbreviations, the graphic expression of emotion by means of capitals, punctuation or smileys, and the frequency of editing.

+Ac messages (26 = 10.4%) were mainly sent by personally unknown colleagues of equal or higher rank and administrative staff. +Æ-Ac or “style-switching” messages (23 = 9.2%) were isolated because the relationship between sender and receiver (who do not know each other) undergoes a change that is reflected in a change in tone. This happens as a consequence of either a face-to-face encounter, or simply because correspondence
was maintained throughout a period of time. Therefore, honorifics change from Vd to tú forms, +Dear opening formulas are replaced with –Dear (for example, “Estimado X” becomes “Hola (X)” or simply the receiver’s name), and closings of the “gracias” or “un saludo” type turn into more familiar farewells such as “Suerte”, “Buen finde” or “Un abrazo”.

-Ac messages (93 = 37.2 %) were sent by personally known colleagues of equal or higher rank about work-related issues. In contrast with +Ac messages, about 90% of -Ac e-mails with no opening are answers or attachments. -Ac messages sent by students to his/her teacher (17 = 6.8%) were also isolated for a detailed study. By and large, their most outstanding characteristic is the informal tone (–Dear formulas, no editing and frequent expressions of emotion), which supports Li Lan’s (2000) observation that younger speakers tend to be more creative and bring their style closer to speech. In this case, the senders are aware of the informal quality of the medium but, in spite of the social cues as regards hierarchical position, they use inappropriate vocabulary and devices, probably due to the lack of knowledge of stylistic protocols.

-P messages (73 = 29.2%) were sent by personally known colleagues or acquaintances, being not (or not directly) related to work. As in -Ac e-mails, no openings mostly occur in answers or attachments. Finally, +P messages (18 = 7.2%) were sent by relatives and close friends.

The most relevant results of the analysis can be summarised as follows: in agreement with Crystal’s results, all messages tend to be short (about 7-10 lines), +P messages being even shorter (about 3 lines long). Opening and closing formulas occur in about 75% to 85% of the cases in all types except in +P (probably because of the increasing number of members of adjacency pairs in this type). This supports the view that, in general, users of e-mail in Spanish/Catalan seem to be strongly influenced by traditional letter writing. Concerning openings, +Dear formulas are preferred in +Ac e-mails (85%) and also in –Ac (57%), but they are replaced by less formal –Dear formulas in –P messages (61%) and +P messages (100%). Pre-closings also display a decrease in formality: formulas including “un saludo” are most frequent in +Ac messages (75%), and also quite frequent in –Ac (37%), although in the latter they coexist with the less formal “un abrazo” or similar (24%). This formula gets nearly the same percentage in –P messages, where the preferred pre-closing is “un beso” or similar (43%). This informal farewell is also the most popular formula in +P e-mails (63%). As regards the sender’s identification, the full name and the job tend to occur in +Ac messages (54%) together with just block signatures (31%), but simply first names gain ground when messages decrease in formality: 55% in –Ac, 66% in –P and 77% in +P e-mails. Regarding stylistic devices, and as it was expected, the frequency of tú forms increases at the same rate as the level of informality: 27% in +Ac, 80% in –Ac, 89% in –P and 100% in +P messages. Likewise, the expression of emotion through punctuation increases in less formal messages (from 13% in –Ac and –P to 50% in +P), as does the use of abbreviations. -P and +P e-mails were found to display the highest degree of grammatical informality: loose punctuation and grammar were spotted in 45% and 44% of the cases respectively. Finally, as regards the features of e-mail described as exclusive, only three messages (one -P and two -Ac) display message intercalation, but the absence of editing does take place in a reasonable proportion (from 30% to 50%) in all types including +Ac, which supports Crystal’s observation that no editing is accepted as a natural characteristic of the modality.
Conclusion

Is e-mail just a hybrid of speech and writing or already a creole? Corpus analyses of English and non-English messages confirm that e-mail is still strongly influenced by the conventions of traditional letter writing, but it is also increasingly regarded as a “pseudo-conversational” form of communication, and it is undoubtedly developing features of its own. Both Crystal (2001) and Baron (1998) rightly conclude that e-mail style is still developing and that in due time two styles of e-mail will arise, one edited and another unedited, the former being closer to formal or semi-formal writing and the latter tending to imitate speech patterns. Hybrid or creole, e-mail defies clear-cut classifications and should not be made to fit discrete dichotomies. On the contrary, it should be viewed as an essentially dynamic modality shaped by usage and increasing communicative needs.

References


