How Has Business Communication Changed in the Last 4,000 Years?

RICHARD WATSON TODD

Department of Language Studies, School of Liberal Arts
King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand
Author email: irictodd@kmutt.ac.th

Article Information	Abstract
	Understanding how language is used in specific contexts and the reasons for this can be helped by examining historical change in genres. In this study focusing on business communication, texts serving the same purpose of demanding payment for a debt but separated by 4,000 years are analysed. The ancient text is a Sumerian cuneiform tablet which is compared to two modern model business letters. The texts are investigated through a genre analysis focusing on functions and linguistic features and a multidimensional register analysis. Both analyses produce similar results with the main exception being the sequencing of functions. The lack of much meaningful change in business communication in the last 4,000 years is likely to be due to the dominant influence of communicative purposes in guiding how language is used.

INTRODUCTION

Analysis of language use in specific contexts is a major area of research within applied linguistics and is addressed both through research paradigms that are particularly designed for this purpose such as genre and register analyses and through the application of broader paradigms such as speech act analysis and corpus analysis. Such research has clear implications and applications, such as providing a solidly founded basis for evaluating the quality of language use, identifying objectives for teaching language use, and finding out why texts take the form that they do.

To achieve this last purpose, in other words to find out the reasons behind how language is used in specific contexts, one approach is to conduct a historical investigation. Tracing how a genre changes or evolves over time can shed light on the reasons underpinning the ways in which language is used in a genre. For example, Ayers (2008) examined the short texts that accompany research articles from 1991 to 2005 and showed that they shifted to account for

a less specialised audience; and Gunnarson (2009) investigated changes in the genre of research articles from 1730 to the present showing an increased standardisation of scientific writing. Most research into genre evolution examines academic language. In other areas, such as business and administration, much of the focus has been on the choices of which language to use (e.g. Wright, 2005), rather than on changes in genre or register features. In this article, I will investigate changes in the genre of business communication. In the previous research in academic genres, Ayers looked at a span of 15 years, while Gunnarson examined 280 years. In this article, I will investigate a span of 4,000 years by comparing business 'letters' written (or chiselled) onto clay tablets in ancient Sumeria around 2,000 BCE with modern-day business letters. A key purpose of this study is to compare the impact of physical context, on the one hand, and shared communicative purposes and expectations, on the other, on discourse features of texts. Given the massive differences in the contexts between Sumeria and the modern business world, we might expect to find little in common between the two forms of business communication. However, if we do find similarities, it is likely that there are commonalities related to communicative purposes underpinning business communication irrespective of the context. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the similarities and differences in terms of genre and register features between business letters written 4,000 years ago and modern business letters.

The data

To obtain the greatest span of time between examples of a genre, I will start with the oldest business communications in existence (and possibly the oldest ever) – cuneiform tablets from ancient Sumeria. Cuneiform scripts used in Mesopotamia from around 3,000 BCE are the oldest known examples of complete writing (as opposed to proto-writing). The writing process involved using a wedge-shaped stylus to make imprints into tablets of wet clay. These were then dried to create a written record. Several hundreds of thousands of such tablets have been recovered although most are at least partially damaged. The majority of these tablets are legal records, such as lists of rations, employment contracts, and land rental contracts, but many are clearly aiming to provide a channel of long-distance communication and were intended to be carried to their recipients (examples can be found in Holt, 1911 and Oppenheim, 1967). Of these, several are concerned with business transactions. The most common purpose of these business tablets is debt collection.

Some aspects of business in ancient Sumeria, even in the limited field of debt collection, are unfamiliar to modern-day business practitioners. For example, one tablet from Ur explains about a creditor's actions to claim a debt: "Imgur-Sin arrived here and claimed 'He owes me one-third of a mina of silver.' He took your wife and your daughter as pledges." (Oppenheim, 1967, p. 91). Others are more familiar, and these include tablets asking for payments of debts,

such as the tablet translated by Oppenheim (1967, pp. 74, 76) which is now in the Louvre. This tablet was written in Akkadian between 2,000 and 1,700 BCE. The text is as follows:

> A message from Şilla_Labbum and Elani: Tell Puzur-Aššur, Amua, and Aššur-šamši:
>
> Thirty years ago you left the city of Assur. You have never made a deposit since, and we have not recovered one shekel of silver from you, but we have never made you feel bad about this. Our tablets have been going to you with caravan after caravan, but no report from you has ever come here. We have addressed claims to your father but we have not been claiming one shekel of your private silver. Please, do come back right away; should you be too busy with your business, deposit the silver for us. Remember we have never made you feel bad about this matter but we are now forced to appear, in your eyes, acting as gentlemen should not. Please, do come back right away or deposit the silver for us.
>
> If not, we will send you a notice from the local rules and the police, and thus put you to shame in the assembly of the merchants. You will also cease to be one of us.

As one of the longest tablets where the full text is available and the purpose is familiar to the modern business world, this text will be used as the business 'letter' from ancient Sumeria which will be compared with modern-day business letters and is termed *Sumerian text*. The header giving the senders' names will not be included in the analysis and the English version of the text will be used. Although there are serious difficulties in translating cuneiform tablets into English, Oppenheim (1967) gives extensive and persuasive detail about how the translation was made and its consequent veracity. This allows us to use the English translation, but caution should be exercised in interpreting the results.

Having identified a suitable Sumerian text for analysis, we can search for modern-day business letters which aim to perform the same purpose. To ensure that the modern business letters are good exemplars of the genre, a search was conducted for comparable letters in two best-selling books of model business letters as such books aim to provide clear examples on which companies can model their own communications (Lindsell-Roberts, 2004; Taylor, 2004). The Sumerian text is a debt collection letter and is not the first time this customer has been asked to make the payment ("Our tablets have been going to you with caravan after caravan"); indeed, it appears to be a communication close to a final demand. Lindsell-Roberts (2004) includes several requests for paying debts at various stages and I will use the suggested fourth reminder of an appeal for payment (p. 175) as one modern-day equivalent to the Sumerian text, termed *Modern text 1*:

"Your account is now four months past due, and you've not responded to any of our requests for payment. By sending your check in the amount of $750 today, you'll ensure the privilege of maintaining the good credit reputation you now have. Take a moment now to drop your check in the mail."

Similarly, Taylor (2004) includes numerous examples of debt collection letters at various stages and I will use a third application letter (p. 138) as *Modern text 2*:

"It is very difficult to understand why we have not heard from you in reply to our two letters of 18 February and 2 March about the sum of $750 due on our December statement. We had hoped that you would at least explain why the account continues to remain unpaid.

I am sure you will agree that we have shown every consideration in the circumstances. Failing any reply to our earlier requests for payment, I am afraid we shall have no other choice but to take other steps to recover the amount due.

We are most anxious to avoid doing anything through which your credit and reputation may suffer. Therefore, even at this late stage we are prepared to give you a further opportunity to put matters right."

Although Modern text 1 is a fourth reminder and Modern text 2 is a third application, they serve the same purpose of being the penultimate letter in a series of debt collection letters (i.e. the letter before the final demand) which appears to match the purpose of Sumerian text. The data in this study, then, consists of three business letters, one from ancient Sumeria and two comparable modern-day letters. Although the dataset is very small, this should allow us to gain some preliminary insights into the similarities and differences between ancient Sumerian and modern-day business communication.

METHODOLOGY

Context is a key issue in researching language use, since it is generally accepted that how language is used depends on the context. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the genre and register approaches to using language for specific purposes. These approaches take the communicative purposes behind texts as the key factor influencing the ways in which language is used in the texts. Following Bawarshi and Reiff (2010), I will take register analysis as referring to broad categories of communicative purpose, such as press reportage and academic discourse, with genre referring to more specific purposes, such as newspaper editorials and research article abstracts.

Historically, investigations of language use for specific purposes became a major focus in applied linguistics in the nineteen sixties through register analysis (Hyon, 2018). The analyses conducted at that time focused on commonly used linguistic features within a register, such as the use of passives in scientific writing. In the nineteen eighties, Swales' (1981) work on research article introductions rose to prominence leading to the development of genre analysis (Swales, 1990) which aims to identify sequences of functions within texts through a move analysis. Genre analysis developed to account for other aspects of language beyond functions and became the most commonly used paradigm in language for specific purposes research. In the nineteen nineties, register analysis made a comeback through Biber's (e.g. 1988) development of multidimensional analysis. Based on corpus and computational approaches, a multidimensional analysis examines how different syntactic features tend to manifest different dimensions of discourse and to co-occur within registers, potentially allowing texts of unknown register to be categorised within a register based on these features.

The Sumerian text and the modern-day texts serve the specific purpose of collecting a debt (and so are examples of the genre of debt collection letters) and fall within the register of business communication. They should therefore be amenable to both genre and register analysis.

Conducting a genre analysis

A typical Swalesian genre analysis aims to identify the move structure, in other words, the sequence of functions, that are manifested in the texts within a genre and the linguistic forms associated with these functions. To do this, Moreno and Swales (2018) propose using a top-down approach in which the text is first divided into sections. These sections are then segmented into fragments which can then be linked to specific functions. In this approach, the sections are similar to Swales' (1990) moves while the fragments may be akin to or more

specific than his original concept of steps. Once the functions have been identified, linguistic features associated with any of the three levels can be identified so that forms can be linked to functions. In this study, I will use Modern text 2 (the longer modern text) as the initial target for analysis and see if the functions identified in this text can act as a model for analysing the other two texts.

Conducting a register analysis

Biber's (1988) multidimensional analysis aims to characterise registers based on their lexico-grammatical features (see Biber & Conrad, 2009 for lists of such features). Biber's work has shown that these lexico-grammatical features cluster into six dimensions associated with different aspects of the communicative context:
1. Involved vs informational production
2. Narrative vs non-narrative concerns
3. Explicit vs situation-dependent reference
4. Overt expression of persuasion
5. Abstract vs non-abstract information
6. On-line informational elaboration

This means that texts can be given scores for each of these dimensions. Previous work (Biber, 1988) analysing eight different registers has shown that each register typically has a limited range of scores on each of the dimensions. For example, informal conversations with their frequent use of features such as contractions typically score in the top third of the range of possible scores for involved vs informational production. Comparing the scores for the texts being analysed with these typical scores shows which registers the texts are most closely related to. In addition, the texts can be categorised into one of seven text types (e.g. learned exposition, involved persuasion). In this study, two multidimensional analyses were conducted (one for the Sumerian text and one for the two modern texts combined) using the Multidimensional Analysis Tagger tool (Nini, 2015).

RESULTS

The purpose of this research is to compare a debt collection business 'letter' from ancient Sumeria written about 4,000 years ago with two modern-day business letters serving the same purpose. As these texts are examples of language use for specific purposes, the comparison will be based on two research paradigms designed for such contexts: genre analysis and register analysis. The goal of the comparison is to identify similarities and differences between the letters from the two contexts to see how business communication has changed in the last 4,000 years.

1. The genre of debt collection letters

The first stage in conducting a genre analysis is to divide Modern text 2 into sections. There appear to be two possible bases for doing this. First, orthographically the text consists of three paragraphs which suggests there may be three sections. Second, the tense structure of the text (sentences 1 to 3 refer to the past; sentences 4 to 6 refer to the future) suggests there may be two sections. To decide between these, we can see for which division (into three or into two) it is easier to assign broad functions. For the paragraph-based division, the first paragraph provides background through stating the debtor's past behaviour. It is, however, difficult to identify coherent functions for the second two paragraphs. For the tense-based division, the first three sentences provide the background (from both the debtor's and creditor's perspective), and the last three sentences indicate future actions and consequences. Dividing Modern text 2 into two main sections therefore seems preferable.

To identify the fragments linked to functions within these two sections, again we can start by taking an orthographic perspective. Each of the two sections consists of three sentences, so it seems reasonable to start by trying to assign functions to each sentence. The first sentence is a reference to previous requests for payment and mentions the specific amount owing. The second sentence highlights the lack of any response from the debtor, and the third justifies the creditor's previous behaviour. There are then sentences on the threat of legal action, the possible consequences to the debtor's reputation, and a request for action. Generally, the sentences seem to match with functions (with the possible exception of the first sentence which both refers to previous requests and specifies the amount). We can therefore set up a provisional genre structure for this letter as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Provisional generic structure of Modern text 2

Modern text 2	Section	Function
[1]It is very difficult to understand why we have not heard from you in reply to our two letters of 18 February and 2 March	Background	Previous requests
[2]about the sum of $750 due on our December statement.		Payment context
[3]We had hoped that you would at least explain why the account continues to remain unpaid.		Lack of debtor action
[4]I am sure you will agree that we have shown every consideration in the circumstances.		Creditor decency
[5]Failing any reply to our earlier requests for payment, I am afraid we shall have no other choice but to take other steps to recover the amount due.	Action	Threat of legal action
[6]We are most anxious to avoid doing anything through which your credit and reputation may suffer.		Debtor reputation
[7]Therefore, even at this late stage we are prepared to give you a further opportunity to put matters right.		Request for action

To check the validity of this generic structure, we can see if it can be applied to Modern text 1. This text appears to be divided into the same sections, and five of the seven functions from the analysis of Modern text 2 can also be applied to Modern text 1 as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Generic structure of Modern text 1

Section	Function	Modern text 1
Background	Previous requests	[3]to any of our requests for payment.
	Payment context	[1]Your account is now four months past due,
	Lack of debtor action	[2]and you've not responded
	Creditor decency	
Action	Threat of legal action	
	Debtor reputation	[5]you'll ensure the privilege of maintaining the good credit reputation you now have.
	Request for action	[4]By sending your check in the amount of $750 today, [6]Take a moment now to drop your check in the mail.

Although there are some variations in sequencing of functions, the generic structure derived from Modern text 2 appears to be applicable to Modern text 1. This is not surprising as they both serve the same purpose within the same context. The Sumerian text serves the same purpose but within a different context, both in terms of the social context within which it was written and the medium of writing, and so we might expect it to be more difficult to apply this generic structure to the Sumerian text. As we can see in Table 3, however, the same

functions appear in both Modern text 2 and the Sumerian text. The main differences appear to be in the sequencing and repetition of functions.

Table 3
Generic structure of the Sumerian text

Section	Function	Sumerian text
Background	Previous requests	[4]Our tablets have been going to you with caravan after caravan, [6]We have addressed claims to your father
	Payment context	[1]Thirty years ago you left the city of Assur.
	Lack of debtor action	[2]You have never made a deposit since, and we have not recovered one shekel of silver from you, [5]but no report from you has ever come here. [7]but we have not been claiming one shekel of your private silver.
	Creditor decency	[3]but we have never made you feel bad about this. [9]Remember we have never made you feel bad about this matter but we are now forced to appear, in your eyes, acting as gentlemen should not.
Action	Threat of legal action	[11]If not, we will send you a notice from the local rules and the police,
	Debtor reputation	[12]and thus put you to shame in the assembly of the merchants. You will also cease to be one of us.
	Request for action	[8]Please, do come back right away; should you be too busy with your business, deposit the silver for us. [10]Please, do come back right away or deposit the silver for us.

If we combine the analysis of the three texts into a single table as in Table 4, the functions identified from Modern text 2 appear to largely be applicable to all three texts. The sequence of sections (Background to Action) applies to both modern texts, but there is some mixing in the Sumerian text. The sequence of functions, however, varies substantially between texts suggesting that there is no clear sequenced generic structure for these texts at the level of functions. There is also far more repetition of functions in the Sumerian text than in the modern texts. I will return to these similarities and differences in the discussion section.

The texts (especially Modern text 2 and the Sumerian text) share some linguistic features which may be indicative of the genre. All of the texts use context-dependent references to people *(we, our, you, your)* which are recoverable from the co-text surrounding the body of the letter. Similarly, the texts make context-dependent references to time and place *(at this*

Table 4
Generic structure of the three texts

Section	Function	Modern text 2	Modern text 1	Sumerian text
Background	Previous requests	[1]It is very difficult to understand why we have not heard from you in reply to our two letters of 18 February and 2 March	[3]to any of our requests for payment.	[4]Our tablets have been going to you with caravan after caravan, [6]We have addressed claims to your father
	Payment context	[2]about the sum of $750 due on our December statement.	[1]Your account is now four months past due,	[1]Thirty years ago you left the city of Assur.
	Lack of debtor action	[3]We had hoped that you would at least explain why the account continues to remain unpaid.	[2]and you've not responded	[2]You have never made a deposit since, and we have not recovered one shekel of silver from you, [5]but no report from you has ever come here. [7]but we have not been claiming one shekel of your private silver.
	Creditor decency	[4]I am sure you will agree that we have shown every consideration in the circumstances.		[3]but we have never made you feel bad about this. [9]Remember we have never made you feel bad about this matter but we are now forced to appear, in your eyes, acting as gentlemen should not.
Action	Threat of legal action	[5]Failing any reply to our earlier requests for payment, I am afraid we shall have no other choice but to take other steps to recover the amount due.		[11]If not, we will send you a notice from the local rules and the police,
	Debtor reputation	[6]We are most anxious to avoid doing anything through which your credit and reputation may suffer.	[5]you'll ensure the privilege of maintaining the good credit reputation you now have.	[12]and thus put you to shame in the assembly of the merchants. You will also cease to be one of us.
	Request for action	[7]Therefore, even at this late stage we are prepared to give you a further opportunity to put matters right.	[4]By sending your check in the amount of $750 today, [6]Take a moment now to drop your check in the mail.	[8]Please, do come back right away; should you be too busy with your business, deposit the silver for us. [10]Please, do come back right away or deposit the silver for us.

late stage, *now*, *here)*. In the background section, all texts use the present perfect tense to highlight the relevance of past events to the current communication. There are also indicators of a lack of agency on the part of the writer *(we shall have no other choice*, *we are now forced)*.

There are also two notable features restricted to individual texts. Modern text 2 is the only text to use first person singular pronouns which act as stance markers in interpersonal pre-verb modification *(I am sure*, *I am afraid)*. The Sumerian text is the only text to use overt politeness markers *(Please)*. Overall, the texts appear to have more linguistic features associated with genre in common than features restricted to a single text.

2. The register of debt collection letters

This section presents the results of a multidimensional analysis of 1) The two modern texts combined, and 2) The Sumerian text. Comparing the findings from the two analyses will allow us to see whether the modern texts and the Sumerian text should be considered as falling into the same register or not.

The first stage in a multidimensional analysis is to tag the target text(s) for syntactic features. These features are combined into clusters which represent the six dimensions of variation in texts. By counting the relative frequency of the syntactic tags associated with each dimension, the text(s) can be assigned scores as shown in Table 5. For example, syntactic features associated with involved interaction are a high proportion of verbs and pronouns (Biber, 1988). In both the Sumerian and modern texts, about half of the noun forms are pronouns, a much higher proportion than is typically found in informational texts. Similarly, in the texts around a quarter of the verb phrases include modal verbs of some type, a feature associated with expression of persuasion.

We can see that, for most of the dimensions, the scores assigned for the modern texts and the Sumerian text are relatively close given the possible range of scores for each dimension. The exception is dimension 6, on-line informational elaboration, where the polarity of the scores is different. From the combination of scores on the six dimensions, a text can be assigned to a certain text type. The modern texts and the Sumerian text are both categorised as imaginative narratives.

Table 5
Dimension scores for the texts

Dimensions	Range of values	Modern texts	Sumerian text
1 Involved	-30 to 60	6.63	13.08
2 Narrative	-10 to 20	4.16	6.68
3 Explicit	-20 to 20	-3.83	-6.42
4 Persuasion	-10 to 20	10.04	18.16
5 Abstract	-5 to 20	2.98	6.02
6 Elaboration	-6 to 10	2.19	-2.09

The scores on the dimensions allow us to provide some characterisations of the texts. The texts, especially the Sumerian text, are interactional rather than informational (Dimension 1); they both provide narratives (Dimension 2), the interpretation of which is somewhat dependent on the context (Dimension 3); and they both clearly mark the author's perspective (Dimension 4). The main difference is that the modern texts have some features associated with unplanned communication.

We can also compare the scores for the texts with scores associated with various registers of language use. In Table 6, 'XX' indicates the closest register match to the text(s) being analysed, and 'X' indicates other close matches.

From Table 6, the registers most closely associated with the texts under analysis are very similar for four of the six dimensions. These similarities for the narrative, explicit, persuasion and abstract dimensions again imply that the two corpora (Sumerian and modern business letters) have similarities in their registers. The two registers which most closely match the business letters (counting the number of matches across all dimensions for all texts) are Letters and Fiction. It should be noted that Letters refers to personal letters, and that business letters are not included as one of the comparative registers. However, Biber (1988) notes that the dimension of persuasion is associated with professional letters, and in Table 5, we saw that this was the dimension on which the modern and especially the Sumerian texts scored the highest. The similarities with Fiction are largely due to the heavy use of past tense verbs associated with narratives.

Table 6
Comparison of the texts against other registers

Dimension	1 Involved		2 Narrative		3 Explicit		4 Persuasion		5 Abstract		6 Elaboration	
Text	MT	ST	MT	ST	MT	ST	MT	ST	MT	ST	MT	ST
Conversation					XX	XX						
Broadcast	X				X	X						X
Speeches	XX										XX	
Letters		XX			X		XX	XX				X
Fiction	X		XX	XX	X							XX
Press			X									
Academic							X		X	XX	X	
Official									XX	X		

MT: Modern texts
ST: Sumerian text

DISCUSSION

Before I interpret the findings to see whether and how business communication has changed in the last 4,000 years, it is worth reiterating the two key limitations that may affect the validity of the findings. First, this study has only investigated three letters. The limited size of the dataset is largely because of the paucity of full Sumerian business texts. The small size of the data is more clearly a limitation for the register analysis which takes a corpus perspective on the data than for the genre analysis which requires manual analysis. Second, the analysis has used a translation of the Sumerian text rather than the Akkadian original since this is the only way that the analysis could be undertaken. Relying on a translation is potentially problematic, especially if the translator based the language of the translation on modern business texts. In this study, Oppenheim (1967) acknowledges that he has not attempted a literal translation since the syntactic bases of English and Akkadian are very different; rather, he has taken the background and the relationship between the sender and the addressee into account in rendering his translation. These caveats mean that the following discussion needs to be treated with some caution.

Despite these limitations, I believe that the analysis has produced some insightful findings. Most notable is the large number of similarities between the Sumerian text and the modern texts. From a genre perspective, both include the same sections or moves and most of the same fragments or steps, and many of the genre-based linguistic features, such as the use of context-dependent references, are the same. From a register perspective, both fall under the same category of text type, have similar scores on most dimensions, and have similar relationships to benchmark registers.

There are fewer differences between the two sets of texts. From a genre perspective, the Sumerian text has a less clear structure and includes some repetition. From a register perspective, the Sumerian text scores more highly for overt expression of persuasion, and there are differences in on-line informational elaboration (although this is the least important of the six dimensions). Overall, we can conclude that there has been very little meaningful change in business communication over the last 4,000 years.

To see why there has been so little change, we can look at the literature on how context affects language use. There are numerous lists of contextual factors that influence how language is used. For example, combining three lists from Brown (1989), Herring (2007) and Verschueren (1999) gives us nine factors:

1. The linguistic channel or modality of the communication
2. The number of participants in the communication
3. The roles of the utterer (writer) and the interpreter (reader)
4. The social world in which the communication takes place
5. The topic of the communication
6. The relevant background knowledge of the participants
7. The mental world in which the communication takes place
8. The physical world in which the communication takes place
9. The location and time of the communication

Of these nine factors, the first six are similar for the Sumerian text and the modern texts. Both are written to communicate over a distance; both have a single writer and reader, but these two people represent groups (the people in the header of the tablet, and companies in the modern texts); in both contexts, interactants are following standard business roles; the communication takes place in the social world of business transactions; the letters are all on the topic of demanding payment of a debt; and the business people involved all have the same expectations of how business works. Whether the mental worlds in the two contexts are similar is unclear, but the physical worlds and the time and place are clearly different.

The key issue here is that the six factors that are similar are those factors that are clearly related to a specific communicative purpose within the business community. Despite the physical differences in time and space, the business community works in the same way with materials being delivered on credit with the expectation that the debt will be paid. When this expectation is not met, the creditor is allowed to demand payment – the specific communicative purpose of the letters – and non-payment results in legal proceedings and a loss of reputation. The communicative purpose and the expected procedures in the business community underpin the functions in the letters (e.g. payment context, threat of legal action,

and threat to the debtor's reputation), the linguistic features used (given the behavioural expectations in the contexts, there is no need to explicitly state the names of the interactants in the body of the letter), and the scores on the register dimensions (both parties are aware of the background information so the communication is interactional not informative, the narrative history of the debt is briefly stated, and the creditor is trying to persuade the debtor to pay). In other words, the shared communicative purpose and the expectations of the community greatly outweigh the massive differences in physical context in guiding how language is used in the letters.

Where there are differences between the two sets of communications, most notably in the repetitions in and unclear structure of the Sumerian text, these are likely to be due to time. However, the time influences do not concern the time difference between the two contexts as much as the relatively short history of writing before the Sumerian text. Since writing was still a relatively recent innovation at the time of the Sumerian text, conventions guiding sequences in a genre had yet to be developed. As Oppenheim (1967, pp. 64-65) explains, "The stylistic conventions of these letters allow the writer considerable freedom in presenting his case to the addressee, shifting from argument to argument, changing topics, returning to previous points". With such a short history to writing, the formal coherence structure underpinning genre sequences did not exist, meaning that, although the same functions and features may be used in a Sumerian text and a modern text, the sequencing of these functions and features had not been conventionalised.

Overall, given the massive differences in physical context, Sumerian and modern business communications are surprisingly similar. The basis for the similarities is a shared communicative purpose which overrides other possible factors. The few differences that do exist are due to the lack of any developed set of conventions governing sequencing in communication.

THE AUTHOR

Richard Watson Todd is Associate Professor at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. He has a PhD from the University of Liverpool and is the author of numerous articles and several books, most recently, Discourse Topics *(*John Benjamins, 2016*)*. His research focuses on text linguistics, corpus linguistics and educational innovation*.*
irictodd@kmutt.ac.th

REFERENCES

Ayers, G. (2008). The evolutionary nature of genre: An investigation of the short texts accompanying research articles in the scientific journal Nature. *English for Specific Purposes*, 27(1), 22-41. DOI: 10.1016/j.esp.2007.06.002

Bawarshi, A. S., & Reiff, M. J. (2010). *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press.

Biber, D. (1988). *Variation across Speech and Writing*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Biber, D., & Conrad, S. (2009). *Register, Genre, and Style*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Brown, G. (1989). Making sense: The interaction of linguistic expression and contextual information. *Applied Linguistics, 10*(1), 97-108. DOI: 10.1093/applin/10.1.97

Gunnarson, B. (2009). *Professional Discourse*. London, United Kingdom: Continuum.

Herring, S. C. (2007). A faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse. *Language@Internet* 4, article 1.

Holt I. L. (1911). *Tablets from the R. Campbell Thompson Collection in Haskell Oriental Museum*. (PhD dissertation). University of Chicago, Chicago, USA.

Hyon, S. (2018). *Introducing Genre and English for Specific Purposes*. London, The United Kingdom: Routledge.

Lindsell-Roberts, S. (2004). *Strategic Business Letters and E-mail*. Boston, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Moreno, A. I., & Swales, J. M. (2018). Strengthening move analysis methodology towards bridging the function-form gap. *English for Specific Purposes, 50*, 40-63. DOI: 10.1016/j.esp.2017.11.006

Nini, A. (2015). *Multidimensional Analysis Tagger 1.3* [computer program]. Retrieved from: http://sites.google.com/site/multidimensionaltagger.

Oppenheim, A. L. (1967). *Letters from Mesopotamia: Official, Business and Private Letters on Clay Tablets from Two Millennia*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Swales, J. M. (1981). *Aspects of Article Introductions: Aston ESP Research Reports No. 1*. Birmingham, United Kingdom: University of Aston.

Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, S. (2004). *Modern Business Letters, E-mails & Other Business Documents*. London, United Kingdom: Prentice Hall.

Verschueren, J. (1999). *Understanding Pragmatics*. London, United Kingdom: Arnold.

Wright, L. (2005). Medieval mixed-language business texts and the rise of standard English. In Skaffari, J., Peikola, M., Carroll, R., Hiltunen, R. and Wårvik, B. (eds.) *Opening Windows on Texts and Discourses of the Past* (pp. 38139). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.