

Asynchronous Communication: Investigating the Influences of Relational Elements and Background on the Framing Structure of Emails

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Abstract

This study explored the influences of relational elements and the background of communicators on the framing structure of email messages that were exchanged in an educational Institute in Malaysia. The investigation revealed that social distance played a more significant role than power relations as Malaysian respondents are, generally, more polite to distant colleagues than they are to close colleagues regardless of their organizational position. It was also revealed that the ethnic background of email writers prompted the framing structure of the emails as the use of the pre-closing move and 'thank you' as a closing marker was generally a Malaysian practice. This study also revealed that the framing structure of the emails depended on the direction of the message as the majority of the emails that were sent to external contacts included an auto signature, whereas the internally exchanged email were mainly signed off using the first name of the sender alone. In addition, it was revealed that email writers in the educational Institute had a very high tendency to name their messages as almost 100 percent of the emails included the identifying topic move, which was generally clearly or broadly informative move.

Keywords: Email communication, Relational factors, Framing moves, Social distance, Power relations

1. Introduction

It is widely believed that the use of E-mail (hereafter email) in the workplace has both advantages (Douglas, 1987) and disadvantages (Wilson, 2002). Research shows that this medium of communication has had and still has several effects on the users, language used and the organizational context in which it is used (AlAfnan, 2015a, 2015b, Baron, 1998). As business communication, in general, and email business communication, in particular, has attracted a number of researchers in the last a few decades (e.g., AlAfnan, 2014a; Ferrera, Brunner and Whittemore, 1991; Rice and Borgman, 1983), it has not taken long for researchers to realize that computer-mediated communication (CMC) and emails are changing the organizational and linguistic practices in the world. Naomi Baron was among the first researchers to point out the effects of CMC on language use (Baron, 1984). Baron's (1984) article was soon followed by other researchers (Ferrera et al, 1991; Herring, 1996) who highlighted the effects of CMC and email on workplace environment.

With the recognition of workplace discourse as part of linguistics, opportunities have arisen for research on workplace communication from a linguistic point of view. Linguists compared between the language used in CMC and the traditional methods of communication (Akar, 1998), and identifying the syntactical and typographical features of electronic mails (AlAfnan, 2014b; Crystal, 2001; Gimenez, 2000). Other scholars (e.g., Nor Azni Abdullah, 2006; Waldvogel, 2005) looked at the features used in emails and argued for more situated in-depth research. As the overwhelming majority of research focused on the content of the email, this study investigates the framing structure of the emails in relation to power relations, social distance and the ethnicity of email writers in a Malaysian private educational institute.

2. Literature Review

Internet as we know it today has been developing over the years. It was used initially by the American Defense Department in the 1960s to transfer data from remote areas. The major concern of the Americans at that time was nuclear attack by the Soviets and their aim was to "decentralize the distribution of defense data so that no targeted nuclear strike would affect America's command and control system" (Baron, 1998, p. 141).

In the early 1970s, Tomlinson invented email, and made sending information and messages, not only data, from one place to another through computers possible. He chose the symbol "@" from the computer keyboard to assign sending messages. Afterward, anyone using the Internet standard could send messages (email) by simply typing the name-of-the-user@name-of-the-computer (Peter, 2014).

Even though the Internet and email were invented, it took almost two decades to publicize them. In these two decades some major institutes and organizations had the privilege of using them in the seventies and the eighties (Hafner and

Lyon, 1996) and it did not take long to recognize email as a communicational medium. Licklider and Veza (1978) wrote that it soon became obvious that the ARPANET (what is called the Internet today) was becoming a human-communication medium with very important advantages over normal U.S. mail and over telephone calls.

Nowadays, emails and computer mediated communication become the phenomenon, and more than 2 billion people use them worldwide for different purposes. Managers, in fact, realized the advantages that could be achieved by adopting CMC and email in the workplace, and they strived to apply them in their organizations from the early eighties.

As a communicational channel, the majority of researchers categorized email as a hybrid method of communication that includes characteristics of written and spoken methods of communication (AlAfnan, 2014a; Baron 1998; Du Bartell, 1995). Interestingly, the hybrid nature of emails was also reported in the framing moves of the emails (Crystal, 2001; Grzega, 1999). Crystal (2001), for example, after examining 500 emails, stated that the framing moves of the emails, especially the pre-closing and the identifying topic moves were strongly affected by the traditions of using these moves in formal letters, but this is not a general implication. Crystal found that the use of these moves depended on the age of email writers. Even though Crystal's emails were written by native and non-native speakers of English, he did not differentiate between the practices of using these moves in relation to the background of email writers. This point, in fact, is worth investigating as it may demonstrate insights into the relation between ethnicity and the framing structure of emails. In contrast to Crystal's findings, Grzega (1999), who compared letters and emails, found no constant relation between the use of openings and closing in the emails and letters. He declared that the informants used a wide variety of options to open and close emails, which makes the task of identifying the similarities and differences in these options a difficult task, as she could not judge whether these options are similar or different.

In a more recent study, Scheyder (2003), who investigated emails in the American context, found that around half of the emails did not include a proper closing move. However, she affirmed that the use of the closing move in emails depended on two main factors that are the purpose of writing the emails and the social distance. She declared that the findings of her study provided new insights to the actual use of email in workplace environments, and she called for further exploration on the use of closings in relation to the regional background of email writers and their socio-economic status (Scheyder, 2003). This point is fundamental in this study, which examines the framing moves used in the emails in relation to relating factors and the ethnic background of communicators.

The literature shows that scholars had their attempts focused on the social implications of workplace electronic communication. Linguists, on the other hand, used a small number of email messages (see for instance Alatalo, 2002; Mulholland, 1999; Nickerson, 2000), collected unrepresentative sample of emails (e.g. Ng, 2003; Nickerson, 2000; 1999; 1998) and focused on native speakers of English (Mulholland, 1999; Markus, 1994; Waldvogel, 2005, 2007) to generalize facts. However, according to Stubbs (1997) the research sample should be big and representative in order to generalize facts. Therefore, to facilitate better business interactions in the future, a big in-depth study is critically needed to draw attention to the way or the style that Malaysian employees and employers view and organize their workplace emails.

3. Methods

This study investigated the framing structure of emails exchanged in a private educational Institute in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. After seeking the permission and receiving a signed consent from seven members of the discourse community, the informants, who belong to different ethnic backgrounds, sent to the researcher 522 email messages that were sent and received in 45 day-in-day-out communications. It was noticed that the received emails were written by Malay, Chinese Malaysian, Indian Malaysian, Jordanian, British, and African respondents. The organizational position of email writers ranged from the Assistant Academic Director to administrative staff. Given that the researcher is a member of the discourse community, categorizing the emails according to the organizational position of internal contacts was unproblematic. However, in order to collect more information about social distance, power relations, and ethnicity of external partners, a questionnaire was forwarded to the main informants. As the informants sent and received emails from a relatively large number of participants (132 participants), the inquiries were designed in the form of a table, which included the names of all participants on one side and the questions on the top. The possible answers were presented beside the names of each participant and under the questions. The questionnaire included three questions regarding the organizational position, social distance, and the ethnicity of the participants. The categorization of social distance into close colleagues, distant colleagues and friends, was adopted from Waldvogel (2005). The answers were used for coding the corpus of emails.

4. Results and Discussion

Examining the framing moves of the emails revealed that the participants frequently, but differently, used six framing moves that are the identifying topic, salutation, opening, pre-closing, closing and signature moves. Noticeably, the frequency of occurrence of the identifying topic, salutation, closing and signature moves was very high, which reflects a high tendency to properly structure the email messages. The occurrence of the opening and pre-closing moves, however, was less popular. The following is the detailed investigation into the framing moves of the emails.

4.1 Identifying Topic Moves

Identifying topic moves are situated in the subject box of the email. They usually include the subject of the email. Examining the use of these moves in the emails shows that they can be easily distinguished into four different clusters according to their informative nature. Clearly informative moves are the moves that provide the recipient of the email clear information about the content of the email before even opening it (see examples 1, 2 and 3 below).

Ex. 1: Subject: Registration Batch Confirmation

Ex. 2: Subject: University of Xxxx Annual Administrative and Quality Conference 2010

Ex. 3: Subject: new syllabus and lecturer guides for new TTH management program

The recipients of these emails may predict the communicative purposes of the emails from their identifying topic move. Obviously, example 1 is confirming the receipt of the registration batches, example 2 is informing about an upcoming conference, and example 3 is delivering the new syllabus and lectures' guides for the TTH management program. Even though example 3 included an abbreviation, it is 100 percent clearly informative, especially for the recipient of the emails. The use of specific lexis is one of the criteria that Swales (1990) set for discourse communities. Even though 'TTH' is an abbreviation that may not be clear for an outsider, however, it is clearly identified and frequently used by the discourse community.

Broadly informative moves, however, are the moves that do not specifically inform about the main communicative purpose of the email. In order to recognize the communicative purpose of these emails, the recipients need to recall their background and contextual knowledge about the topic and the person sending the email (see example 4).

Ex. 4: 3.95. (Subordinate, position, rarely)

Subject: Part A

I hope you can forward me the soft copy for Part A which is common to the college to attach to our documents, as per our discussion this morning

In example 4, the identifying topic move as a separate unit does not inform about the communicative purpose of the emails. The move may raise a number of unanswered questions regarding 'Part A'. However, identifying the sender may enlighten the recipient about 'part A' and what about it. Viewing the content of the email shows that 'part A' is a document that is 'common to the college to attach to the documents' before sending them to the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA). In addition, the content shows that this email was preceded by a discussion that morning, 'as per our discussion this morning', and that the recipient of the email, promised to deliver 'part A' to the sender of this email. The broadly informative identifying topic moves, as example 4 shows, are dependable on the 'From' box in the email, which identifies the sender of the messages, and helps the recipient recall background knowledge and experience.

Uninformative moves are the moves that are randomly written by email writers and do not reflect any academic or organizational issues. The only method to identify the content of these messages is reading them, as neither the context nor the identity of the writer informs about the purpose (see example 5).

Ex. 5: 7.45. (Equal, far colleague, monthly)

Subject: Sorry

Sorry, I won't be able to attach the students list to you today as i still didn't finalize the list yet. I will forward the list by tomorrow

As example 5 shows, the identifying topic move of the email is simply 'sorry' with no other clarifications about the purpose of the apology. Even though it is obvious, from the content of the email that the recipient was waiting for students' list, the identifying topic move is very uninformative, as it had no reference to the purpose of the apology or to students' list. The only way to know the reason of the apology is to read the email as neither the identifying topic move nor the name of the sender reveals the main purpose of the message.

Ex. 6: 3.3. (Subordinate, far colleague, expertise, monthly)

Subject: RE: New Institution Officer [Scanned]

I cannot find this student on our system, do you have a USN for him?

Confusing moves, however, are these moves that do not have any relation to the content of the email (see example 6). As example 6 shows, the identifying topic of the email is 'New Institution Officer', the content of the email, however, is a request for a student's USN (matric) number. The initial 'RE' at the beginning of the identifying topic move reveals that the email is a 'reply'. Obviously, the first email was informing about the appointment of a 'new institution officer', however, the current email is a request. This practice, in fact, led into having 26 confusing identifying topic moves, as they do not refer to the actual communicative purpose of the email.

4.2 Salutation and Opening Moves

To give deference at the launch of the email, email writers used two opening moves that were called the salutation and

opening moves. As it occurred in 442 email messages (85 percent), the salutation move is the third most common move in the corpus. Opening, however, is the least common as it appeared in 19 email messages only (4 percent). Salutations can be generally distributed to two main categories that are formal and informal salutations. Formal salutations usually included a title or a formal salutation-marker in front of recipients' names as in 'Dear Mr. Name', 'Dear Name', 'Mr. Name', 'Dear Sir/madam' or 'Salam Mr. Name'. Informal salutations, however, refer to the salutations that either included an informal salutation-marker in front of recipients' name as in 'hi name' or 'hello name', or had no salutation-marker at all as in 'name'. In addition to these two main categories, some email writers used a salutation that did not entirely fit into any of the above-mentioned categories, that is 'Hi Mr. Name' or 'Hello Mr. Name'. The use of 'hi' or 'hello' in professional communication is considered as an 'informal linguistic option' (Al-Ali and Sahawneh, 2008), yet the use of 'Mr.' is a 'formal conventional lexical option' (p. 58). As such, the use of 'Hi' or 'Hello' jointly with 'Mr. Name' is an unconventional linguistic form in professional communication. Examining the formality and informality of salutations shows that the almost two-third of salutations were formal (62 percent), whereas the use of informal, unconventional and the use of no salutation occurred in (38 percent), which actually shows the overall formal nature of salutations in the emails (see figure 1).

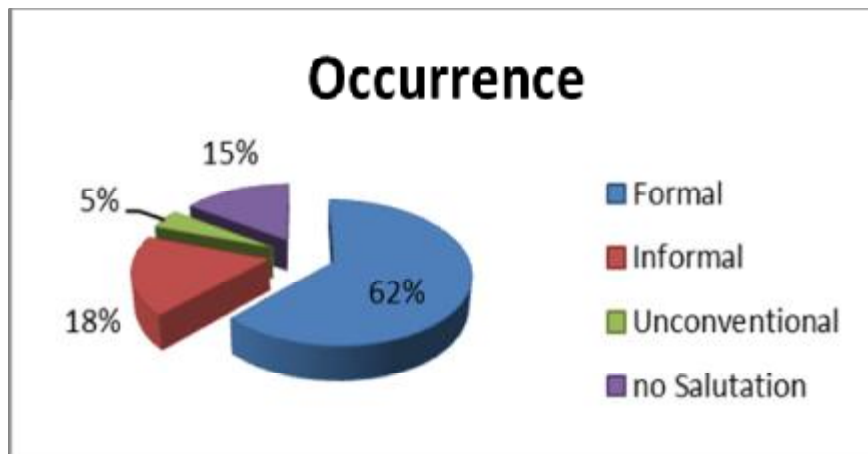


Figure 1. Salutations in the corpus

Examining the effect of relating factors on the use of salutations shows an interesting finding that staff members are more polite to distant colleague than they are to close colleagues regardless of their organizational position. As table two shows, 216 (almost 67 percent) of formal salutations were used in emails that were sent to distant colleagues. Informal, unconventional and the use of no salutations, however, have mainly occurred in the emails that were sent to close colleagues. Interestingly, this feature is a distinguished feature of the emails that were sent by Malaysian and Jordanian respondents, whereas the majority of the emails that were sent by the British and African respondents mainly included formal salutations.

Table 1. Influence of relating factors on the use of salutation

Type and SD	Formal		Informal		Unconventional		No salutation	
	CC	DC	CC	DC	CC	DC	CC	DC
PR								
Superior	38	50	25	16	5	3	35	13
Subordinate	23	89	25	13	7	2	14	12
Equal	48	77	9	6	6	0	5	1
Total	109	216	59	35	18	5	54	26

PR: Power Relations; SD: Social distance; CC: close colleague; DC: distant colleague

In addition to the effect of relating factors on the use of salutations, it was also noticed that the position of the email in the on-going chain of emails has also had a great impact on the type of salutation used. A deep observation showed that the majority of the emails that belonged to chains included formal salutations, especially in the first few emails in the chain, and specifically, if the recipient of the email was a distant colleague. However, as the chain grew longer, the formality of the salutation declined from formal to informal or even conversational.

4.3 Pre-closing and Closing Moves

Email writers in general use one closing move to close the email politely (Scheyder, 2003) and express deference (Waldvogel, 2005). Email writers in the educational Institute, however, used two closing moves that were called the pre-closing and closing moves. Closing move is the second most frequent move in the corpus as it occurred in 450 (86 percent) email messages. Pre-closing move, however, has the second lowest frequency among framing moves as it

occurred in 96 (18 percent) email messages. Examining the use of the pre-closing moves shows that unlike the use of salutations, openings or the identifying topic moves that highly depended on the social distance between the interactants, pre-closing move depended more on the ethnicity of email writers. It was found that the majority of the 'thank you' pre-closing moves were used by Malay and Chinese Malaysian employees. The 81 'thank you' pre-closing moves were used 36 times by Malays, 27 times by Chinese Malaysians, 16 times by Indian Malaysians, and two times by the Jordanian lecturer. The British and Africans, however, did not use 'thank you' as a pre-closing marker. This actually shows that the use of 'thank you' as a pre-closing marker depended on the ethnicity of email writers and that it is a Malaysian and Jordanian practice.

Examining the closing move shows that the interactants used three main closing markers that included the different types of 'regards', 'wishes' and 'thank you'. In addition to these three main closing markers, the interactants used a quite large number of irregular closing markers that were mainly informal: such as 'Take care', 'Cheers', 'Good luck', 'Warmest', and 'All the best'. Noticeably, the overwhelming majority of the irregular closing markers were used among internal close and distant colleagues. The use of these markers was either a general practice by a staff member or a specific practice that reflected the content of the email as in the use of 'Good luck' or 'All the best' in the emails that were sent to students informing them about exam dates or the due dates to submit their assignments.

The noticeably striking finding is that the closing marker 'thank you' was used by the Malaysian and Jordanian internal contacts only. The thanking closing marker occurred in 153 messages, all of which are written by Malay, Chinese and Indian Malaysians, and Jordanian employees in the institute, this, in addition to some Malay and Indian Malaysian external contacts who work either in a medical clinic or on contracts with the institute. However, none of the British or English respondents used 'thank you' as a closing marker.

Examining the formality and informality of the closing markers shows that some of the respondents used short forms such as 'tq' for thank you and 'rgds' for regards. Even though the use of these short forms was not very common, however, it was found that they mainly appeared in chain-type messages, especially in the emails that included an enquiry. It is also noticed that four of them occurred in emails that were sent using the BlackBerry mobile technology. As the writers of text messages "combine letters for compression and convenience" (Rafi, 2009, p 397), it is obvious that email writers using 'BlackBerry' technology have adopted this practice in their emails (see example 7).

Ex. 7: 3.106. Subject: Re: emergency leave

That's a green light. Ill pray that your dad will go thru the surgery ... tq

Sent from my BlackBerry® wireless device via Vodafone-Celcom Mobile.

4.4 Signature Move

Signature move is one of the most common moves in the emails as it appeared in 482 email messages, giving an overall frequency of 93 percent. The writers used two different types of signatures, which are the auto signature and the signing off using the first name. Auto signatures are manually prepared and appear electronically at the bottom of every new email message sent by the writer, unless manually deleted. These signatures usually included the sender's full name, position, name of the organization, full address, and contact details. It is found that 265 email messages (55 percent) included the auto signature move, whereas the remaining 217 emails (45 percent) were signed off using the first name. Even though the auto signature appears automatically when composing or replying to a correspondence, it was noted that not all the emails that were sent by the employees who use auto signature had the move. Ms. BP, who has an auto signature that appears in all her externally exchanged emails, usually signs off her internally exchanged emails using her first name only. This shows that the auto signature move is used to create credibility in the part of the recipient, especially in the externally exchanged emails. However, as staff members know each other, Ms. BP preferred signing off using the first name only. This practice appears to be popular in the emails of three out of the four main informants who use auto signature. The fourth informant uses the auto signature in his internally and externally exchanged emails.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the use of framing moves in 522 email messages that were exchanged in a private educational institute in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Overall, the use of the framing moves was very popular in the emails, which indicates a high framing formality in the emails exchanged in the Institute.

Communicators used either clearly or broadly informative identifying topic moves, which gave the chance to the recipients to assume the topic or the communicative purpose of the email before even opening it. This actually reflects writers' tendency to name the emails in relation to their subject. The use of salutations, however, was mainly affected by the social distance between the communicators. The use of formal salutations was popular in the emails that were sent to distant colleges, whereas the use of the informal, unconventional and the use of no salutations was popular in the emails that were sent to close colleagues regardless of power relations between the communicators. Examining the pre-closing and closing markers showed that almost 100 percent of the pre-closing moves and the use of 'thank you' as a closing marker were used by Malaysian and Jordanian respondents. It was perceived that British respondents did not use a pre-closing move and preferred the use of the different types of 'regards' or 'wishes' as closing markers. This actually shows that the use of 'thank you' as a pre-closing or closing marker is more of cultural than professional practice in the email messages. The use of signature, however, depended on the direction of the messages. The majority

of messages that were sent to external contacts included auto signature, whereas the majority of the internally exchanged emails were signed off using the first name of the writer, which shows that the signature move is used to create credibility in the part of the recipient, especially in the externally exchanged emails.

This study showed that social distance plays a more significant rule in the framing structure of emails than power relation, as the majority of Malaysian respondents were more polite to distant colleagues than they were to close colleagues regardless of their organizational position. It was also perceived that the ethnicity of email writers affects the framing and linguistic structure of the emails as some closings and pre-closings were exclusively used by the Malaysian staff. This study also showed that the direction of the email message affects the framing structure as the majority of the externally exchanged emails included formal salutations, proper closings, and auto signature, while the internally exchanged emails included less formal framing moves.

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