

## CONSIDERATIONS ON THE STYLE AND THE STRUCTURE OF EMAILS USED IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** The article focuses mainly on presenting the mixed nature of an email, which contains elements of both the written and the oral language. The analysis is conducted on 300 emails exchanged between business professionals working in a multinational company, where English is used for international communication. The structure of the email is first outlined (formulas of address, content, closing line and signature) and then compared to that of the traditional business letter.

**Keywords:** email exchanges, professional communication, a mixed style, email structure, politeness formulas, traditional business letter

### 1. Introduction

Electronic mail is one of the most frequently used means of communication. Electronic mail has conquered territories belonging to other types of communication such as face-to-face conversation, telephone calls, notes, memos, traditional mail and telegram, due to some special characteristics. These special characteristics, like rapidness, reduced costs, the ease of replicating and forwarding them, accessibility, have increased people's preference for electronic mail and have caused the abandonment of other means of communication. The language of the internet has been discussed in various linguistic works; special mention must be made here of Crystal's (2001) *Language and the Internet*.

The characteristics of electronic mail have not passed unnoticed by business professionals since reduced costs, rapidity and accessibility are crucial factors for this category. Therefore, the use of email has quickly replaced the traditional business letter; the latter is significantly less used in everyday professional communication than two decades ago. Still, the content and the structure of the email exchange have preserved elements of the business letter sent by regular mail, but they have also adopted particularities of oral communication.

### 2. Corpus

This article is concerned with the typology, style and structure of emails used by professionals in everyday communication. The analysis has been performed on a number of 300 emails exchanged between professionals working in a multinational company, some professionals working on Romanian territory and others in foreign countries. The language of these exchanges is English, but the business professionals are both native speakers of English, and non-native speakers of English. The analyzed

emails are not the only means of communication used between these people, videoconferencing and phone calls are also employed. The frequency of the exchanges between pairs of recipients varies from several emails a day to one exchange in the entire analyzed period. The emails were gathered over a period of ten work days, in the spring of 2008, and they have not been selected in any way. However some of the emails are a follow-up to a previous conversation carried over the phone or in a videoconference, therefore the informational logic is at times disrupted.

According to the level of formality, the analyzed emails can be grouped into three categories: regular emails exchanged between co-workers (referred to as the first category), emails exchanged with professionals belonging to other organizational structures, either messages to establish a first contact or subsequent messages (referred to as the second category) and emails that are official organizational announcements, containing information about company accomplishments (referred to as the third category).

Before getting into details regarding the structure and content of the analyzed professional emails, a few general observations regarding the particularities of these messages are made here. Even if email messages are written, hence belonging to written communication, they differ considerably from business letters sent by regular mail. The differences are easily noticed, especially as far as formality and tone are concerned, but also in length and structure. By contrast with traditional business letters, which are formal, lengthy and have a well-established layout, the analyzed email messages, regardless of the category they belong to, are more informal, shorter and do not have a distinct structural pattern.

The first category is the bulkiest and most dynamic. It is characterized by a low level of formality and is made of 224 messages, representing 75% of the total received messages. These messages contain simple informational structures and minimal elements of formality. Usually one single piece of information is introduced and the email consists of a few words, resembling the replies in a face-to-face conversation, rather than a traditional letter. In this group, a message does not have a self-explanatory content; only by reading several or all messages in the same series can one understand the logic of the message. Frequently these emails have attachments containing data and other specific information. Very little attention is paid to the spelling and the punctuation rules in these messages.

The second category contains 64 messages, representing 21% of all messages; these emails are meant to establish a first business contact, or are subsequent exchanges, addressed to suppliers, auditors and other professionals that are not part of same corporation. All emails in this group have a formal tone; they resemble most what is commonly considered a business letter. One can understand the informational content of the email without having to read the entire series. However, this group is made of minimal pairs of one initial email followed by a reply. Even if the structure of

the email is not as complex as that of a business letter, the messages have no spelling mistakes and punctuation marks are used accurately.

The third category contains only 12 messages, representing 4% of all analyzed messages. These emails contain official information regarding important company achievements and structural changes (new divisions, mergers and important personnel changes, usually regarding top managerial positions). This is a special group of emails, resembling more to a set of press releases. They have an official tone and a high level of formality. The messages have a dense informational content and a well-established structure. Every message constitutes an independent unit, and the sender does not expect a reply. Grammar, spelling, vocabulary and punctuation are flawless in these emails, and they are probably written by professional writers.

### 3. The structure of the e-mails

#### 3.1. The external frame

All three categories of professional email messages have both an external and an internal component, this being a particularity of electronic communication. The external component of the messages indicating the sender's name, the receiver's name, subject, date and exact time, is consistent in all analyzed emails. According to Christensen (2003), the external structure of the e-mail resembles to a great extent the opening section of a memorandum: from, date, to, subject line. The difference between the opening section of a memo and the external structure of such an email is the position of the information, in a separate exterior frame of the message in the latter case. However, in their external frame, the emails contain, other information, like indication about the existence of an attachment (attach), about other recipients (cc.) or about the size of the message.

Analyzing the emails, it is clear that the external frame is considered important by these professionals. Because the amount of mail they receive in their inboxes is considerable (more than 30 messages per day), the external information is used to prioritize reading and categorizing these messages. The first category of emails contains most frequently a signal regarding urgency in the external frame. Half of the emails belonging to this category have subjects like: *urgent*, *needs urgent confirmation*, *answer needed asap*, *urgent – please reply*, etc. Other subjects point out how important the message is, and a phrase like *important - please read carefully* is used. In one particular message, the external component contains the informational content of the message. The informational content is normally expressed in the internal component. The subject is used to locate the recipient, *where are U?*, and this email has a completely blank internal component.

Even if the professionals in this first category use a low level of formality, messages labeled as *urgent*, frequently have the word 'please' associated with these subjects. This association is made to soften the imperativeness of the word 'urgent'. The presence of the word 'please' signals consideration for other people's problems,

and indicates awareness of the fact that one's priority is not always someone else's priority as well.

In connection with the external frame of the message, my research has revealed that the higher the level of formality, the more neuter the subject of the message. While the subjects of the emails in the first category can be either suggestive or specific, referring to a certain piece of information, the subjects in the second category are more general, usually being a summary of the information contained in the email. The following are subject lines of the emails in the first category: *delayed meeting, part number 129876, back to work, project meeting, where are U?, packaging items – stocks*. In some messages, the subject line is identical with the title of the attached document (e.g. *December new part numbers.xls.*). The subject lines of the second group have a different structure: *proposal for cooperation, supplier agreement, supplier contract status, approved manufacturers*. The subject line of the third category is invariably the same *organizational announcement*, thus the receiver can easily identify the type of message contained in the email, and not what the message is actually about.

A particular element of emails, present in its external frame, obviously influencing the level of formality in the internal component of the email, is the line indicating carbon copy (cc.). The email messages exchanged between co-workers, namely those having a low level of formality and containing more elements specific to oral communication, are more carefully written when the message contains other recipients in the cc line. The more numerous the people in the cc, the more formal the message becomes, especially if the other recipients in the cc line are higher ups. The sender pays more attention to the manner in which the information is rendered. Similarly a more formal approach is present in emails having several recipients; even if the recipients have an informal relationship, there is still evidence of a more attentive choice of words and linguistic strategies when writing these particular messages.

### **3.2 The internal component**

The internal component of the business email has several elements which are common to the business letter: an opening line or salutation, the body of the message, a closing line and a closing formula, accompanied by the sender's name and title. However, this structure is applicable, according to Caudron (2000:32), only in the case of a new subject email; the salutation, and even the closing phrase, may be missing in the case of a reply, or when several emails are exchanged on the same topic. This characteristic is borrowed from direct interaction, where one never greets or takes leave after a single reply. This is customary at the beginning or at the end of the conversation. Consequently, business emails do not require a salutation or a closing phrase, unless there is a new subject line.

This research however shows that Caudron's findings are only partially accurate. It is true that emails in the first group have such formulas with new subject lines, but not in all cases. There are situations in which the topic is continued on the next

business day or there is a longer time interval between the messages exchanged on a certain topic; for these cases salutations and closing lines are used. (E.g. *Hi, Jeff, it's me again.* or *Hello Tom, on second thoughts I think we can solve this in a different way.*) Furthermore, some of the analyzed emails do not have a salutation, but they contain a closing formula. (E.g. *Speak to you later!, I'll get back on that!, Well that's all could find so far. Bye for now!*) The emails in the second group contradict Caudron's theory even more. All 64 messages have these polite formulas at the beginning and at the end of the email, even when the exchanges have the same subject line. Organizational announcements also have opening and closing formulas, but the inventory is extremely limited: in the beginning *to all employees, dear employee, dear colleagues* and at the end *regards*, or no closing formula, just the name and title of the sender.

Another element that needs attention is the use of the signature in 96% of all messages. By 'signature', reference is made here to the standard, automatic addition of the sender's full name and complete contact information at the end of the email, and it is distinct from writing the sender's name immediately after the message. The practice of using a signature is present in 288 messages, with the exception of the group labeled as "organizational messages", all emails have a signature. I am aware that it is an automatic addition to the message, still its presence or absence in the email is established by the sender of the email. If the sender has chosen to insert a signature, it means that this is viewed as necessary. Indeed the elements of a signature (full name, job title, company name, company address in full, company phone numbers, the sender's mobile and email address) are important contact information for the world of business. In this way, the recipient has this crucial information about the sender available at all times.

Organizational announcements do not have a signature inserted at the end of the message, but they have the information about the sender, such as the full name, job title and name of the department inserted at the end of the message. Job titles like *president, vicepresident, CEO, head of Asia Pacific Division* are used to give weight to the message. Three organizational announcements have two people signing the same message, the president and the vice-president of the respective division (one displayed to the right and the other to the left). In this way the message seems even more official. However, the contact information (like email, address, phone or fax) is not included at the end of the message, since it is not necessary for the recipient and since the recipient is not required to send a reply. Professionals will follow the organizational structures to communicate with their supervisors or higher-ups, so top managers' contact information although available, is not included in these emails.

An interesting particularity of the signature in emails belonging to the first group is that it is doubled by sender's first name. 202 emails, (out of 224) belonging to the first group, end with a variant of the sender's name (first name, nickname) followed by the signature. Even if the full name of the sender is included in the automatic signature, the sender feels the need to end the message differently, in a way that reflects more accurately the level of formality that exists in that particular relationship.

Having the name of the sender written twice in an email message is chiefly a particularity of emails belonging to the first group. This element is not signaled in the other two categories.

The signature is impersonal and official and it does not match the informal tone of the emails of the first group. Therefore the sender prefers to use a different way of identifying himself/ herself, a variety which is more appropriate for the informal relationship existing between sender and recipient. If the signature follows the same rules as in written communication, being positioned on the left side of the page and containing contact information in the full, the use of sender's first name or nickname does not obey any of these rules. The first name can be either unchanged (e.g. *Adrian, Tom, Garry, Gerd, Sonia, Lia, etc.*) or shortened (e.g. *Adi, G., Cristi, adi n.*). These first names may be written without a capital letter (e.g. *adi n.*), they may be shortened to a minimum (e.g. *G.*), or placed on the same line with the closing formula (e.g. *Regards, Gram*). It is these names that indicate once more the relationship existing between these professionals, and not the automatic signature that is also displayed at the end of the message.

Emails of the first category are also the most interesting ones from the point of view of the tools used to render the content more vividly. An email message in the business environment is theoretically void of such features. However, many of the analyzed emails contain elements that may be seen as an effort made to take professional communication out of the daily routine. Professionals that work together ten hours a day, exchanging numerous messages everyday and sharing and solving their work problems, regardless of the fact that they are situated on different continents, form a business family. Therefore, any professional communication in a certain business family allows more freedom than in the case of occasional business exchanges. Even if these emails are short and oriented towards one specific piece of information, the messages are 'spiced up' with various elements such as acronyms, emoticons, the use of various colors for the text, different sizes of text, uncommon use of punctuation marks, etc. The occurrence of these elements in the other two groups is extremely rare.

Acronyms appear both with reference to professional information exchanges (e.g. *fyi, asap*) or to personal life (e.g. *Have a nice WE!*). One possible explanation for the presence of acronyms is given by Angel & Heslop (1994: 111), who consider the use of contracted forms of words as a means of creating a conversational style that is not intimidating. There may be other reasons for the use of acronyms, such as saving time when writing the message or force of habit (especially *fyi* and *asap* are frequently used in the business jargon).

Emoticons or similies are noted in the first category, but are absent in the second and the third group. The main function of emoticons, generally speaking, without specific reference to professional communication, is to make up for the major drawback of written communication, namely the impossibility of rendering non-verbal cues that are present in direct interaction (Nistorescu, 2006: 113). However, the

occurrence of emoticons is not as extensive as one may think, only 15% of first category emails have such elements in their structure. The preferred emoticons are: **)-:** or **(-:** and they are used only in association with personal commentaries on professional matters (being right or wrong about certain data or information, or expressing one's feelings about something). Occasionally, the emoticon **:-\** is used to express dissatisfaction.

The use of a different color in the text of the message is chiefly resorted to underline certain important bits of information. The color red is preferred, but occasionally blue is also used. Red is meant to underline important or required information, changes operated on previously transmitted data, prices, etc. Sometimes both blue and red are used in the same message. This practice is recorded in 21% of the messages in the first group and 2% of the messages in the second group; it is not accounted for in the third category. Rarely is this practice associated with a different size of the letters making up the emphasized words.

Punctuation is used for emphasizing purposes as well. The most common practice is the repetition of some punctuation mark in order to underline something. It is present in 26 % of the messages. The generally preferred punctuation marks involved in repetition are the exclamation mark and the question mark. They are used mostly in messages in which contradictory pieces of information are discussed or in which professionals wish to point out something. The punctuation marks are not only repeated, but sometimes also colored in red or having a different character size font from the rest of the text. Punctuation used for emphasizing purposes does not appear in the second and the third category. However, even if certain punctuation marks are used repeatedly in the first category of emails in some occasions, the same category is illustrative for the lack of other punctuation marks in the body of the message, especially commas. The second and the third categories have punctuation marks used according to grammar rules.

#### **4. Conclusion**

My research has revealed that both the form of the emails and their content display considerable more variety in the first group and more consistency in the second and third groups. The email exchanges between co-workers have various layouts, with the salutation or the closing phrase written in the same row as the body of the message. The block format, also the most frequent format in business letters, is preferred in most emails; 90% of all analyzed emails use the left alignment. The remaining 10% is the semi-block format, which appears only in first category of emails. Thus, the salutation and the closing phrase are placed in the center of the page, while the name is on the right hand side. However, the signature is always aligned to the left.

In conclusion, this study has pointed out that professionals use various email structures and styles in their everyday activity. These structures and styles depend on the relationship existing between these professionals. They exchange more emails with other professionals from the same corporation than with people from a different

company. These emails have a low level of formality and display the greatest variation in form and style. They reflect to a higher degree the dynamics of oral communication, and have little resemblance to written communication. The emails exchanged with professionals belonging to different corporations have a formal tone and are similar to traditional business letters. The special category of emails containing organizational announcements, emailed to the employees of a corporation, due to the informational content have a special structure and tone. The structure is that of a press release, whereas the tone is official. Due to the fact that organizational announcements do not constitute ordinary exchanges, as a reply is never customary, they constitute a special subcategory in professional communication.

In order to see more clearly the differences that appear within the three groups of emails presented above, a more detailed analysis of the fixed structures of the emails is necessary. Fixed structures, such as salutations, terms of address, closing phrases and complimentary closes, can give more information about how professionals use linguistic tools to communicate efficiently and effectively. In everyday interaction, these fixed structures indicate to what extent emails belong to written or to oral communication.

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