STRUCTURE OF EMAIL DISCOURSE IN A SELECTED IRANIAN ORGANIZATION

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Abstract: - This study attempts to investigate structure of email discourse in a selected business context in an Iranian organization. The data of this study consist of a corpus of email messages (N=112) which are exchanged among members of a selected Iranian organization. The study examines structure of email messages by draw on the DeVito's categories of conversation structure framework as the basis for analyzing. The selected strategies reflect the writer's interpersonal relationship with their email intractants. Findings reveal a predominance of main conversational structure of email messages like opening salutation and opening statement, closing salutation and closing statement, other discourse structure like clauses in imperative and declarative moods. Furthermore, the findings are useful to create materials about structure of email discourse in the Iranian business context which can be incorporated into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching and training.

Key-Words: - Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), E-mail discourse, Organization

1 Introduction

Nowadays mainly business communications are conducted through CMC and email is the most well-known kind of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). It has become a major strength in modern communication exchange. Indeed email plays an essential role in establishing and maintaining business relationships, together within a company and with external interactions (Bafoutsou & Mentzas, 2001). Presently e-mail has replaced the traditional communication including letters, phone calls, and faxes and has become a tool of communication in all business environments (Tassabehji & Vakola, 2005).

Emails are crucial in many organizational processes such as information exchange, project management, and client support. The email networks are becoming very popular for both analysis and visualization (Bafoutsou & Mentzas, 2001). Electronic discourse such as emails and instant messages among employees are usually archived in the organizations and these can be used to identify the informal discourse structure within the organization apart from discovering common interests among individuals (Bafoutsou & Mentzas, 2001), which can help the organization to achieve effective communication.

The fixed structure of discourse that email messages are written from is one of the main principals that show email is resembles to traditional letter. Thus by following the structural elements of a skilled communication, as a general rule including a "To" and "From" address, a subject header, a space for copies, and a message body, this structure has become ever more standardized among compositional applications and generally accepted by email users. This structural format is a account of the intra-organizational memo, a pattern originally created in the late nineteenth century for summarizing communication within a large organization (Danet 2001, p. 52).

The propensity to include both a greeting and a farewell signature is another example of the specified influence of traditional letter writing engaging email composition, each element separated from the main body message and frequently given its own line. According to linguist David Crystal, in his comprehensive study of the linguistic components in email composition, the farewell signature provides two functions that are not found in traditional letter writing. First, he claims that "it acts as a boundary marker, indicating that further scrolling down is unnecessary…that no further personalized test is following" (Crystal 2001, p.105). In addition, the farewell signature provides as an identifier if the message forwarded to other addressees or referenced in a community communication field, such as a mailing list.

The overall aim of this study is to investigate structure of email discourse in a selected Iranian organization. This study attempts to investigate how people communicate via email in the pursuance of their work related activities and how language is utilized in email when members of this organization communicate with others inside and outside the organization to realize a common purpose and to achieve their goals.

2 Literature Review

In the early stage of email research, scholars in general first tried to understand the "nature" of the electronic language by comparing it with spoken and written language (Gains, 1999; Baron, 1998; Sims, 1996; Yates, 1996; Collott & Belmore, 1996; Maynor, 1994; Uhlíøvá, 1994; Ferrara et al. 1991), and to identify features of orthography, typography and grammar in electronic texts (Waselesky, 2006; Hård af Segerstad, 2002; Gimenez, 2000; Crystal, 2001; Murray, 1990).

Most of the recent studies for example, Hård af Segerstad (2002), investigated how written language (email language) is modified and extended in the electronic means with the intention of relevant factors of context which are implanted in the communicative functions, such as genre, goal of interaction, relationship between communicators. Her study involves an evaluation of three different forms of CMC; email, web chat, instant messaging (IM) and SMS.

Based on Gains (1999), a study survey of the text features for internal communication in business emails, depict that the majority common features of email discourse are subjects, closings, openings, in addition to linguistic features like compression, abbreviations, omissions and register. Gain described a high degree of consistency in the way writers used most of these categories in his samples. He collected his data from a "closed system for internal electronic mail" (p. 82) which could have a "permanent legal status" (p. 90) for the company under his researched. This may perhaps clarify observed standard forms of language. In view of the fact that there is a high chance that writers chose the standard forms to write their messages because the email users knew that their messages will become legal records.

Gimenez (2000) focused on the features of text in business emails through a study of external business email communication. A convenient mode in the style and register of business emails has been revealed in his data analysis. The language used in his data "contains simple, straightforward syntactic structures, showing a preference for co-ordinated rather than subordinated ideas" (p. 241). Gimenez also discovered in his study, standard as well as personalised uses of abbreviations, contracted forms and capitalisation and spelling mistakes. He encapsulates his study that "efficiency, one of the features of email messages frequently mentioned by email users, seems to equate with informal and flexibility of style" (p. 250). His data, although, consisted of messages which exchanged between the export manager of a UK based company and some of his international clients which may help to clarify, for instance, the informal style of the texts analysed and some of the language used by the international clients.

A study by Hadina (2003), investigates the patterns of email discourse in workplace communication. Emails exchanges are analyzed with the intention of explicate how members of an organization interact through email to meet the specific communicative needs of the organization. Her data analysis shows that in the context of workplace communication, the existing linguistic such as resources are used creatively and purposively by the use of email in meeting the specific communicative purposes of members of organizations.

A literature reveals that most of the studies concerning email communication and discourse in Iran have been mostly carried out within the education context and not within the business context. This therefore highlights that there is indeed a lack of knowledge of the features and characteristics of email discourse in the Iranian businesses and thus creates a gap in the understanding of emails structure that used in Iranian organisations within the business context. Therefore an investigation on structure of email discourse in Iranian business context may provide insights into the Iranian ways of communication via emails and hence contribute to a body of knowledge about CMC in the Iranian context. This article is provided an insight into Iranian business' email as a kind of discourse. The findings are useful to create materials about structure of email discourse in the Iranian business context which can be incorporated into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching and training.

3 Research Method

This article focused on a selected manufacturing organization in Iran. The selected company is active in manufacturing automotive diagnostic scanners,

and distributing wide a range of garage equipment and other repair tools for equipping auto service centres and authorised workshops. The medium of the data of this study is electronic mail, which is known to possess the structure of both spoken and written communication. The structure of the discourse in the company consisted of three levels

as well; internal communication which is communication between units and departments inside the company, external communication which is communication between the company and international companies and communication between the company and other local companies, this is shown in Figure 1.
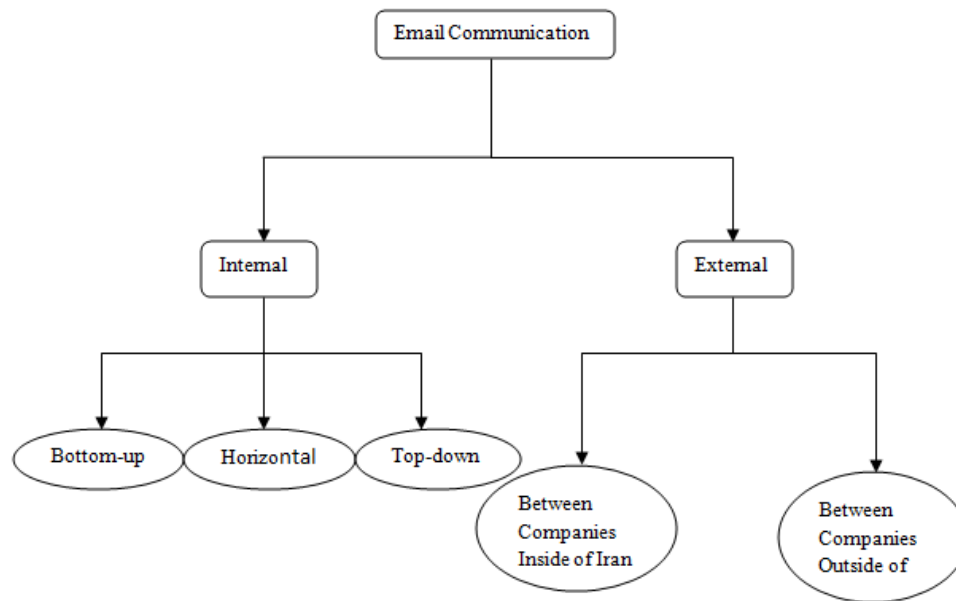

Fig 1: Thee Level Communication Structure of the Company

This is a descriptive case study of a selected manufacturing organization in Iran. In this case study design, the researcher was interested in insights, discovery and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam 1998). The corpus comprises 112 email messages were collected from the organization which are representative of the range of email conversation among employees. The emails collected represented both the internal and external communication of the organisation. Internal communication refers to the communication within the organisation whereas external communication refers to the communication between organisations. The emails also represented the top-down, bottom-up and horizontal flow of information within the organisation as shown in Figure 1. This paper focuses only on the structure of email discourse. DeVito (1999) states that a successful communication can be divided into five stages, including: 1.Opening, 2.Feedforward, 3. Business (Conducting and caring on), 4. Feedback and 5. Closing. The conversational structure that represents the five steps that take place in a

conversation is adapted for analysis. This is because email communication is the contiguous to interpersonal communication between all the forms of internet communication (DeVito, 1999). Therefore, in order to analysing data, the researcher adopted the DeVito's categories of conversation structure framework to describe structure of email discourse used by Iranian in their workplace.

4 Findings and Discussion

Findings are discussed in relation to conversation structure like opening salutation and opening statement and closing salutation and closing statement that is the manner in which the communication takes place in entire conversation process right from the opening to the closing conversation. Other discourse structures like clauses in declarative and imperative moods also are discussed.

4.1 Conversation Structure

The conversational structure that represents the five steps that take place in a conversation is adapted for **analysis. This is because email communication is** the contiguous to interpersonal communication between all the forms of internet communication (DeVito, 1999). Additionally, writers of email point out that they view email as strictly similar to spoken interaction as written interaction. According to DeVito (1999) a successful communication can be divided into five stages, including: 1.Opening, 2.Feedforward, 3. Business (Conducting and caring on), 4. Feedback and 5. Closing.

4.1.1 Opening
At this stage is opening a conversation which is typically started by some figure of greetings such as "Hi", "Hello", "Dear", and "how do you" and so on.

4.1.2 Feedforward
The next stage refers to feedforward which is given by participant of a conversation about the discussed topic to the other speaker.

4.1.3 Business (Conducting and Carrying on)
At this stage, the conversation will shift into the topic itself. During a conversation, one may attain the purpose of the topic or making connection between participants. This stage is longest part of a conversation.

4.1.4 Feedback
In dissimilarity with feedforward, a speaker must confirm if the topic has come to closing after the conversation procedure being conducted.

4.1.5 Closing
The last stage of a conversation refers to closing in compare to the first stage. After the conversation procedure has been completed, the participants will bring the conversation to end. A conversation regularly ended by words such as "Thank you", "Best regard", "Regard" and so on.

All the emails include business conversational structure since all the company emails which were provided and analysed were business emails. The openings and closings were almost all the same following a cliché format. Almost all emails started with the "hi" and "Dear+ name) opening and closes with "regards" and (Thank you) as shown in sample examples below. This may be attributed to the low language proficiency of the employees with regard to speech acts and conversational strategies. Only

one example of very informal greeting "hi guys" was used. All the other emails start with the expression "dear Sir" or "Dear Mr. …) and end with the expressions "regards" or "best regards". Examples extracted from the data are given here to clarify the explanations.

Table 1 illustrates the analysis of the conversational structure of the email messages of the organisation. The table indicates that in the organisation, the opening-business-closing sequence of the conversational structure was the most common and followed by business feature, opening-business and business-closing in sequence. The data reveals that most of emails employ structure of opening – business-closing.

Table 1: Summary of the Conversational Structure found in Email Messages of the Organisation

Conversational Structure	The Company
Opening-business-closing	35(31.2%)
Business	12(10.5%)
Opening-business	15(13.3%)
Business-closing	20(17.8%)

To give an insight to the reader, an example of email # 33 analysis is provided in below to show the conversational sequence:

Opening: - opening conversation step
> *Dear ...... ,*
> *It is our pleasure to introduce our company, ****** – as the Iran's most well known Distributor in wide range of garage equipments and other repair tools for equipping auto service centers and authorized work shops in Iran .*

Feedforward: - highlighting point of conversation
> *We work with many giant automotive producing factories in Iran like Saipa ,Iran Khodro, Pars Khodro, Kerman Khodro, and etc, for which we have achieved their satisfaction and confirmation ,Specially considering sale department including 14 agencies ,after sale services and training centers in all around Iran.*

Business: - justifying point
> *Our show room is located on Azadi Ave- Tehran exhibiting the world's most well known and efficient equipments.*

Feedback: - expecting fulfilment of business
> *Since I already have your general catalogue so we only need the general price list to welcome the introduction of your company's products for exhibition, sales and business cooperation.*

Closing: - close the conversation
Best Regards

The following section examined the mood used in the email messages. Mood expresses the speech function, the underlying organization feature of the exchange information which according to Holliday's (1994, p. 362) "giving or demanding information or goods—and—services, which determines the few basic speech functions of statement, question, offer and command". These basic functions are typically realized in the indicative (i.e. Declarative and Interrogative) and Imperative moods. The three mainly usually structures used are discussed which are: the mood in opening, business and the closing processes of conversation.

Opening step

The opening step was mainly characterized by the use of declarative mood or the use of statements, followed by imperative (directive), interrogative and excelamative mood as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: the types of Mood identified in the Opening Sequence in Emails of the Company

	Declarative	Imperative	Interrogative	Exclamative
Opening phases	35 (78.2%)	6 (5.3%)	5 (4.4%)	4 (3.5%)

The reason of out coming result was that the opening step indicates the starting point of information exchanges. Therefore, email writers will use statements to provide an introduction, to recall earlier exchanges or present background information of a new topic. The imperative mood, was recognized as a directive, was used in the opening step when the sender refers to an earlier communication. This usually took place in chain consisting of two or more messages or, only one message to check on definite subject, refer to Email # 39.

> *Dear ***** /****,*
> **It was a great chance meeting you as well and I cordially miss the second chance to meet you again**

The interrogative mood in the opening step was accepted when the sender wanted to confirm the information in the previous email. An example (Email # 79) is given below to show that the sender asked if the statement discussed in the earlier discussion was ready.

> *Dear Mr. *****,*
> **Can I call the forwarding agent for this week?**
> *Please let me know*

The exclamative mood that consisted of greetings and compliment was found in the opening step where the sender greeted everybody before stared giving information or details in the emails as highlighted in email # 9.

> *Dear Mr.*****,*
> **Hi, Hope this message finds you great.**

Business Step

According to DeVito (1999) this step is the matter and the centre of a conversation. It is usually the greatest part of the conversation. This is where the general idea of the information is dispersed. Therefore, the declarative mood was mostly used and this was seen in 58.7% of the emails as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The Mood identified in the Business Step in Emails

Mood	Declarative	Imperative	Declarative-Imperative	Imperative-Declarative	Exclamation
Frequency of use	54 (58.7%)	9 (9.8%)	14 (14%)	7 (7.6%)	2 (2.2%)

The declarative mood was used to explain situations, to inform events, to report company activities and to justify action among members or engaged by managers. In the declarative-imperative mood it was observed in the emails that the sender described the situation and asked the receiver to perform the tasks as illustrated in Table 4.
The last step of the conversation process according to DeVito (1999) is the closing step and it is the opposite of the opening step. Consequently, it usually includes a mixture of both verbal and nonverbal basics of communication. The closing step indicates the meaning to end of the

conversation and it also indicated the end of convenience. Therefore, the closing usually highlights some "supportiveness points" (DeVito 1999) in which the sender expresses delight in cooperating. DeVito also declared that the closing may also summarize the conversation.

Table 4: Conversational Sequence of Email # 21

Conversational Sequence	Email messages
Opening	*Tnx for your reply.*
Business **-Declarative** **-Imperative mood**	*-We send money to you ASAP* *-But please send the goods (obdII) tomorrow. Ok?*

Closing step

The mood identified in the closing step in email communication in organization is shown in table 5 and demonstrated in the following example.

Table 5: The mood identified in the business step in emails

Mood	Declarative	Imperative	Declarative-Imperative	Imperative-Declarative	Exclamation
Frequency of use	28 (54.9%)	18 (35.3%)	2 (3.29%)	1 (1.96%)	1 (1.9%)

Table 5 indicates that the declarative mood was used mostly in the closing step and was followed by the imperative. On the other hand, there were extremely few examples which used of the imperative-declarative and interrogative moods. The declarative mood in the closing step was used when the sender wanted to make a promise and taken action such as; to apologies, to express gratitude by thanking, to show expectations and to emphasis points which had made in previous emails, refer to email # 30.

> *I 'll give you the details for the shipping company or maybe DHL today .*
>
> *Waiting for urgent reply*
>
> **Thanks indeed**

The opening step in the emails of the organization mostly used the declarative mood because the opening signaled a stage of access and this was the part in which the writers of email provided background information regarding to the business subject. An imperative mood was usually used in the opening phase when the writers started immediately with a directive and this happened mostly when referring to the previous communication. The business phase was characterized by the use of the declarative mood in most emails and it was the substance of the conversation and therefore this phase provided explanation of the email's topic or subject of the message. The declarative-imperative mood was used when the email did not have a closing and then the writers of email used the imperative mood to get the reactions to carry out some questions.

A summary of the findings so far of the organization presented in this section and summarized in Table 5 as following.

Table 5: A Summary of Findings of the Company

Features	Company
Closing	Thank you Best Regards
Opening	Dear--- Dear all Name

Table 5 is an overall summary of the findings which indicates the common structure of the message format which are used in the organization, such as, opening, closing, and message flow within the data. The most featured closing which were used in email communication in the organization were "Thank you" and "Best regards," followed by the opening function such as "Dear +name" and "dear".

As summary of the Mood part of analysis indicated that language plays a role in   communication to indicate that interactants of email discourse in the organization adopted explicit communication structure to attain specific purpose and therefore, different mood were used when writing to different people in relationship to the role and mostly the language used in emails communication indicated language in action.

The analysis accomplished to provide that the email readers had an insight view of the structure of emails in the Iranian organisation context. Also it introduced the reader to the forms of the language used and structure in written emails at the Iranian workplace. Furthermore, the analysis gave a better understanding of how email was used as social

action and how members of the organisation deal with it; in written emails.

4 Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to describe the structure of email communication in a selected Iranian organisation and to analyse the email texts communicated by members of the organisations. Since all the employees of the selected Company are Iranians, their email exchanges may be considered as a representative for the Iranian email discourse. But it should be mentioned that this study was too limited to be able to be over generalized to all the Iranian email discourse.

All the emails included a header showing the identity of the sender and the receiver and the subject of the mail. The opening was always respectful and polite. But the phrases were cliché and almost all begin with "dear …" this can be an indication of a weak English language skill. The body of all the emails represented the business emails. All the emails were related to the business and work issues. The language used was straight forward and simple. Some traces of grammatical errors were visible. All the emails were ended by a closing and the closing phrases were the same for approximately all the emails.

Structure of email communication in organisation, there were two noticeable structure of email that could be derived from the analysis of the data in terms of the language style inherent in the email messages. They were the formal style and conversational style. The formal style of language was characterised by the use of formal tons, complete sentences, and detailed descriptions of the content that closely resembled the formal written conversations. The conversational style was characterised by the use of a conversational tone, the use of minor sentences, and excessive use of paralinguistic (such as exclamation marks, trailing dots).

From the study, it was also found that the generic structure of emails in organisation was similar to the structure of conversation as proposed by DeVito (1999). These were the opening, business and closing phases. The phases were mostly written in declarative mood although as few examples that exemplified imperative mood in the phases were also identified in the study.

The discourse structure adopted in the opening sequence of the emails set the stage for the communication by introducing a topic, by referring to previous communication or updating information. The emails' business phase was characterised by the

writers addressing the matter under discussion and this was achieved by giving specific instructions, reporting action taken and checking or confirming information, among other characteristics. The closing phase was characterised by the discourse strategies of giving suggestions, maintaining friendliness and stating expectations.

The analysis of data indicated that there are several factors that influence the construction of email messages. A subordinate writing to the boss would choose a formal style with a proper lexical and proper intonation. For example, a respect would be characterised by the use of the politeness marker 'please'. On the other hand, the use of 'please' by the boss writing to a subordinate could constitute a directive, and the directive can be written in the imperative form with the use of formal language.

In sum up, business discourses and transactions are more and more conducted via the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and therefore email as the most familiar type of Computer Mediated Communication, is certainly a powerful force in modern communication exchange. Providing knowledge and insight to this powerful means of communication is useful for organisations, companies and businesses. They can improve their functions and communication strategies by using the results of this study. On the other hand CMC and email communication is a relatively new discourse and more knowledge about the details and characteristics of this new trend in discourse can be used in improving the linguistic theories related to discourse analysis.

This study may be repeated in other types of organisations such as educational or official settings. Other languages may be selected as the language of email and the native language of the senders and recipients and the differences that may occur can be investigated. The study may be conducted in different organisations to compare the email discourse, functions and styles in different organisations.

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