Discursive-Linguistic Devices and Strategies in Spam E-Mail Narratives

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we aim at relating emotions and gender stereotypes through the analysis of the narratives contained in spam e-mails. We will present four different types of spam e-mails from a corpus consisting of 450 emails, their length being between four and fifty-two lines of extension. They were received between late 2009 and mid-2013, and written in English, Spanish, Portuguese and French. Our analysis will be carried out in two steps. In the first step, the discursive-linguistic strategies will be described. In the second step, the linguistic expression of emotions will be addressed. We will rely on the Positioning Theory of Rom Harré to identify where authors and readers are positioned in the narratives.

KEYWORDS

Deception, Gender Stereotypes, Linguistic-Discursive Analysis, Online Anonymity, Spam E-mails

1. INTRODUCTION

Every technological innovation seems to have its negative, fraudulent or damaging aspects for the users, and spam e-mails are just one example. Information and communication media such as electronic e-mails find in spam a perfect means for damaging or fraudulent practices. Thus, a certain fear caused by the anticipation of any kind of damage, either in a physical or psychological way (Jimenez, 2013), becomes part of the online obscurity process in which spam e-mails are involved. Online obscurity is a general expectation, and not the sole purview of a certain class of Internet user (Hatzog & Stutzman, 2013).

In our daily lives, we have to learn how to deal with these fears, trying to construct and deconstruct them through a critical analysis (just as the one we propose), since not even a good anti-virus avoids completely these kinds of e-mails. Some long ago acquired gender stereotypes, together with our childish fears, stay with us during adulthood and some people learn how to evoke them so as to deceive others by using certain mechanisms to bring them back, in order to meet their goal: getting people’s money, according to previous research (Belli & Jimenez, 2015). Spammers adopt particular gender stereotypes as part of their own personas online to create a connection with money.

While carrying out our research on spam narratives, we have witnessed a development of these mechanisms, with an improvement of the rhetorical strategies used in the stories designed to achieve their goals as the discursive-linguistic strategies for deceptions. These are an evolution regarding the narrative genres utilized by the senders, who create new examples, such as the academic spam (addressed to professors and researchers) or the business spam (addressed to the private sector).

In our current social context, surrounded as we are by messages of crisis and anxiety (Belli & De Eugenio, 2014), or loss of trust in society (Belli, 2015), fear has increased and expanded its
consequences in our societies (Belli & Diez, 2015), and it is playing a favorable role for any kind of deceptive messages. We can imagine, for instance, the emotional cost of a business e-mail received by a reader worried about a professional career (Seabrook, 2013) that is becoming more and more precarious and uncertain or, in the academic spam case, the possibility for the receiver, a person willing to develop their academic career, of seeing a chance of publishing a paper in exchange for money or, sometimes, for profits derived from the publication.

Taking all of these facts into account, our main aims in this paper are to:

1. Observe persuasive discursive-linguistic strategies related to deception used in these narratives to deceive the receiver and hide their main objective (that is, fraud);
2. Find out how different emotions are expressed linguistically (linguistic expression of emotions) by senders, and how they help them achieve their goals, applying the gender perspective.

We develop an analysis of the narratives contained in spam e-mails, either with a supposedly female sender or a male one. This analysis might also help us in finding out whether senders have an ideal reader in mind when they write these e-mails and whether they bear in mind gender when they think of that ideal receiver.

Besides using concepts related to Critical Discourse Analysis, such as those of veracity and legitimization, in this step of the analysis we will heavily rely on the Positioning Theory (Harré & van Lagemhove, 1999; Harré, 2000) to identify where authors and readers are positioned in the narratives contained in these spam e-mails. Every one of these texts can be understood as a form of tacit and intentional positioning of the authors which includes a rhetorical re-description of the events that happened (e.g., a dangerous situation or a wonderful opportunity).

2. STATE OF THE ART

2.1. Storytelling, Narratives and Emotions

In a wide sense, storytelling means relating a series of events (Miller, 2010). Traditionally, storytelling was oral, and the teller and listeners shared a common space and time. Nowadays, the Internet and multimodality in Information and Communication Technologies are offering us several tools and new scenarios for telling stories in different, synchronous and asynchronous ways.

A narrative, as Goldie (2012) declares, is something that can be told or narrated, or just thought through in narrative thinking. It is more than just a bare annals or chronicle or list of a sequence of events, but a representation of those events which is shaped, organized, and colored, presenting those events and the people involved in them from a certain perspective or perspectives, thereby giving the story a narrative structure with specific characteristics (coherence, meaningfulness, and evaluative and emotional import). These spam e-mails we analyze appear many times as autobiographical narratives. Goldie (2012) illustrates this point with an example: “I might tell you how I was cruelly treated by my father, thinking that I am doing so in order to elicit your sympathy.”

On the one hand, these long tales may help adults deal with their emotions, experiences and internal fights, contributing, most of the times, to the transmission of cultural stereotypes. On the other hand, they evoke characters and situations from our childhood, thus re-creating feelings and emotions deeply rooted in our minds. Miller (2010) states that projection, identification, empathy, imitation, and imagination “are important processes when it comes to people and stories”. According to that, we can study identification and empathy as two processes that take place when the receivers of these spam e-mails read the narratives.

Regarding feelings, Belmonte (2007) labels different emotions (fear, rage, surprise, happiness, sadness, disgust, guilt and shame, among many others) and describes the opposition between emotions and rationality. According to Harré (1986), emotions and personal relations have always been somehow