Chapter 2

Status and Email Construction in Three Hong Kong Workplaces

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ABSTRACT

In many workplaces, social relations such as hierarchy may be uniquely indexed and performed in the email environment. In order to study this phenomenon, 250 emails were collected in three different Hong Kong organizations (corporate, non-profit, and university), and examined the impact of hierarchy on the email practices. It was found that the ways that members of diverse organizations navigate the (sometimes competing) domains of transactional and relational workplace discourse in their email communication are influenced by social variables interacting on different levels. On the macro-level, email discourse is influenced by linguistic conventions that characterize both the “professional email culture” and norms specific to the organization or community of practice (cf. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2007, Holmes and Stubbe 2003). On the micro-level, substantial differences in emails written by members of the same organization are explained by personal, interpersonal, and socio-structural factors, among them, professional rank and individual style.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of our study is to investigate features of business, non-profit, and academic, email communication in Hong Kong, using a Communities of Practice (henceforth CoP) framework. Here we examined 100 internal emails from an engineering company (pseudonym BHJ), 40 emails from a non-profit organization (pseudonym Public Company), and 100 emails from two academics in one department at a university (pseudonym NL at GGU). This collection resulted in three widely varying corpora as a function of different workplace types and different data providers, a rich compilation particularly in view of the fact that email researchers are largely at the mercy of what participants will provide them. This richness is intensified by the varying number of players over short messages interspersed over
several communicative events, which allows us to isolate individuals’ practices. The benefit of this type of amalgamation is the window it gives us into different workplace cultures and communicative practices.

Interesting about the study of workplace email communication is the fact that the domain, the message initiator, and to a broad extent, topic, are automatically held relatively constant. We obtained another constant by restricting the study to the internal emails in each workplace. Thus, we were more likely to obtain a picture of both individual email style as well as any potential workplace-specific trends.

The uniqueness of email as a communication medium is owed in part to its intrinsic nature as an oral-written hybrid medium: as a written medium, it allows persons an unusually intense, regular, and potentially persistent contact with their own discourse, with metalinguistic awareness (even ‘hyperawareness’) (Rowe 2007). As an oral-linked medium, email turns are often short, with rapid turnaround (Baron 1998). Already written language is typically less spontaneous than oral language; but in the workplace, email—unlike the paper office memo (which still persists in many organizations in some aspects of workplace life, such as meeting agendas and minutes)—encourages short, frequent communications, rather than the weekly ‘laundry list’ of items typical of the hardcopy office memo practice. Furthermore, email also serves as an efficient correspondence and recordkeeping tool (Hoessjer & Severinson-Eklundh 2009, Waldvogel 2007), particularly with its ‘include previous message’ feature (Rowe 2007).

Moreover, Sproull and Kiesler, in their seminal 1986 article, find, among other observations, that “because reminders of the presence of other[s] are...weak in [email], people [when emailing] are self-focused rather than other-focused (1986:1500). They also found that “messages [to and] from superiors look the same as messages [to and] from subordinates” (1986:1497) indicating an ‘equaling’ effect of email. This, in their view, resulted in people being more likely to be comfortable using email to communicate ‘upward’ in the hierarchy while preferring, in their study, face-to-face for ‘downward’ communication (1986:1507).

These findings do not apply to all workplace scenarios, as Sproull and Kiesler themselves submit (1986:1510). It is clear from accommodation effects found in some studies, for example (as in Rowe 2007 and elsewhere), that some e-mailers are at least equally other-focused as self-focused. The present study, too, will find e-mailers engaging in very other-focused activity, as shown in status effects in the study. Furthermore, results found by Hoessjer and Severinson-Eklundh (2009), for example, contradict Sproull and Kiesler’s finding about egalitarianism; indeed, they found in their newsroom study that email had the effect of reinforcing existing hierarchical structures, rather than equalizing them. In our study, as well, it is found that messages to and from superiors may or may not look like messages to and from subordinates, and that this depends in most cases on the individual style preferences of the e-mailer. While some e-mailers did not appear to communicate according to status of the addressee, others displayed a pattern that did reveal a status-oriented communication style. These findings are along the lines of O’Neill and Colley (2006) who found status effects in email style between student and (faculty and administrative) staff. In fact, one of the more striking status effects was stylistic accommodation (Giles and Powesland 1997), and in particular, initiative (referee) shift (Bell 1984). We find this effect as well; the difference between our study and Hoessjer and Severinson-Eklundh’s, however, is that our most interesting effects obtain in a downward direction—that is, from superiors to their subordinates.

In terms of routine communication, Hoessjer and Severinson-Eklundh (2009) noted that many organizational groups used a ‘template’ style of correspondence, particularly with one- and
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