Chapter 21
Analyzing the Discourse of E-Mail Communication

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ABSTRACT
Communication by electronic mail has become a widely used medium within various organizations. Yet, the possible emergence of various discourse features is not widely discussed in the literature. This chapter investigates the discourse features of real examples of e-mail messages drawn from an international commercial source in Turkey from several aspects: functional categories, stylistic features and register. Analysis of functional categories suggests that messages are used to disseminate information for a variety of work-related purposes to inform, to request, to direct, and to praise. Stylistic analysis reveals that messages contain various features analogous to spoken discourse. At the level of register, messages are found to display various levels of formality. From the analysis, those features commonly used in e-mail messages are illustrated with reference to sample data. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings and suggestions that the future research might take.

INTRODUCTION
The advent of computers in the Digital Age has profoundly changed the process of sending and receiving information in the media of business communication. Rice (1995) notes that “electronic mail has given communicators a new and powerful tool for reaching audiences within, across, and outside organizational boundaries” (p. 110). Communication tasks that have been previously accomplished through face-to-face conversation or telephone are largely replaced by electronic mail (e-mail), which has become the most frequently used communication tool to produce and at work.

Many researchers converge on the belief that e-mail is a more useful and versatile medium than other forms of intra-organizational communication including face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations (Adams, Todd & Nelson, 1993; Zack, 1994; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). An international
survey by Rogen International (2001), a global communication consulting and training company, on the impact of e-mail has shown that the use of e-mail has grown by more than 600% in six years from 1995 to 2001, with executives spending at least two hours per day, receiving, checking and sending e-mails in the workplace communication. The survey, conducted with the participation of one thousand four hundred senior and middle level executives, also shows that more than 66% of executives believe face-to-face communication skills had declined in their organizations due to the growing use of e-mail, and that 85% of participants agree that e-mail has helped improve organizational communication and has revolutionized the quick and broad distribution of information.

Other studies have also shown that e-mail communication to carry out various tasks provides a more efficient communication channel thus making it preferable to older means of communication (see Markus, 1994; Sullivan, 1995). Sullivan (1995) conducted a survey to find out preferences among staff members for face-to-face, telephone, written and electronic mail communication channels. The study reveals a significant preference among staff members for the interactive communication technology of e-mail over other communication channels.

In describing the emerging technology of e-mail systems, Lee, in 1983, predicted that “the impacts of electronic message transfer will extend far beyond the postal and telecommunications industries to those involved in the production, handling, and transfer of information and messages” (p. 2). In 1990s, this prediction has been confirmed by Selwyn & Robson (1998) who noted that “society has seen the emergence of e-mail as an increasingly pervasive means of communication. Throughout the 1990s, due to its relative simplicity and effectiveness, e-mail has quickly been integrated into business and commerce”. Likewise, more recently, Crystal (2001) argues persuasively that computer-mediated language represents the fourth medium of communication developed in human history, with spoken language, written language, and sign language representing the first three.

Gains (1999) underlines three unique combination of characteristics of e-mail as a communication means, which can account for the reasons for the explosion in the use and preference of e-mail. First, e-mail is asynchronous in that it does not require the real life existence of sender and receiver for communication to occur. Second, e-mail provides recipients with text written messages. Third, e-mail can address multiple recipients in a single action. And senders can distribute messages quickly and easily as it is convenient and relatively low cost.

Given the crucial role of e-mail for human communication in the Digital Age, analyzing e-mail messages may yield significant information as to the purpose for which people write e-mails, the conventions writers use, and textual features of business communication. Thus, findings may be helpful for teachers, course designers and materials producers involved in the teaching of written communication in Business English. As confirmed by Rice (1995), for communicators effectively creating, transmitting, and receiving information requires careful consideration of how to control multiple, interacting variables that affect message style.

This chapter aims to explore the discourse features of real examples of e-mail messages from an international commercial source to reveal functional categories, stylistic features and register used in messages. First, theoretical grounding for the development and analysis of e-mail as a communication system is provided. The ensuing section gives the rationale for initiating this study and details the methodology that is used to address the three issues which have become research questions guiding the rest of our study. The corpus of data is described, followed by a detailed analysis of the key text features of data source. The article concludes with a discussion of our findings and directions that future studies might take.
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