Chapter 27
Inferences in Discourse Comprehension of E–Mails

Mojisola Olateju
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

Oluwabunmi Adeleke
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to examine the inferences in the discourse comprehension of electronic mail which has become one of the fastest means of communication around the world. The data corpus was got from one hundred e-mails from eight different faculties in the academic community of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ilé-Ife, Nigeria. From the analysis, the authors noted that, inferencing enables the reader to interact with the text and its contextual elements thereby supplying the missing link between the text and the context. The analysis also revealed that the interpretation of implicit information requires inferencing while that of explicit information does not. It was also noted that code-switching aids inferencing in e-mail. The chapter also noted the implications of this growing medium of communication on students, researchers, curriculum planners and reading specialists.

INTRODUCTION

E-mail communication, being one of the fastest means of communication has become the most commonly used in organizations, companies, academic environment, business centres, etc to give and receive information, share information for personal and social needs and advertise wares etc. Among academics in higher institutions in Nigeria, e-mail and instant messaging have become the easiest means of communicating with one another within and outside the country. Before the advent of the e-mail, most of the information meant for the generality of Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) community were pasted on notice boards or printed as short notices and placed in people’s pigeon holes in various departments. With the emergence of electronically mediated communication, OAU developed a website and e-mail services and encouraged members of the academic community (academics, administrators, students) to have e-mail addresses of their own. Different departments also developed
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their own websites through which information could be received and disseminated.

The recent developments in communication in general have drawn attention to e-mail and fax which have taken over as the most common forms of exchanging written messages. Many scholars have mentioned the need to research into the effects of the new technological developments on the social, business and academic lives of people in general (Eustace, 1996; Gains, 1999). In an attempt to examine how academics produce, interpret and comprehend e-mail texts, the following questions readily come to mind: Are there differences in response to e-mails? Are there inferences that could have been made that were not made which led to late or no response to mails?

This work therefore sets out to;

a. Identify the explicit and the implicit information in an e-mail and
b. Examine the kind of inferences that can be drawn from the interaction between textual and contextual elements of a text.

BACKGROUND

Scholars such as Gimenez 2000 & Louhiala-Salminen 1996, who have conducted research on different forms of electronically mediated communication, have noted some changes in people’s written interpersonal communication.

The Economist (1996) claims that e-mail combines features of spoken discourse (its nature) with those of written discourse (its representation) to be transmitted or received by a computer and this gives it a semi-formal nature which is convenient and acceptable to many people.

In an attempt to draw attention to the importance and usefulness of e-mail, Louhiala-Salminen (1996) surveyed eleven well-known ELT textbooks and notes that only two of the textbooks made reference to e-mail. Working on the conventions of business letters, fax and e-mail, Louhiala-Salminen (1999) notes that the conventions of business letters are well established while those of fax and in particular e-mail are not stabilized which makes fax and e-mail to have more variation in language use. Louhiala-Salminen claims that writers are less constrained to conform to certain standards with electronic mail and that it is possible that where there is an established relationship between correspondents, the register will be personalised. Louhiala-Salminen (1999) also notes that one of the reasons for the informality of fax and e-mail is the context dependence of these types of messages. To Louhiala-Salminen, fax and e-mail are often less explicit than letters because it is assumed that the reader already has some background knowledge about the situation. Working on three distinctive features of email messages i.e register, style and contextual aspects, Gimenez (2000) claims that ‘the register is simple and has straightforward syntactic structures’ (p.241). He notes that features such as ellipsis and reliance on immediate context, use of demonstrative modifiers rather than definite articles are preferred in e-mail register. As regards style, unconventional abbreviations illustrate the informal and personalized style of e-mail messages.

Koester (2004) claims that, ‘e-mails are less important types of documents’ and are follow-up to sent documents (p.33). Contrary to the claims of Koester (2004) that e-mails are just follow-up to the official information that have been sent and received, at times, no correspondence has taken place through surface mail prior to the reception of electronic mail. Even though Koester (2004) sees e-mail as a less important document, it is still one of the fastest for contact. The fact that decisions can be taken on correspondence through an e-mail pending the reception of surface mail correspondence makes it important.

E-mails sometimes refer to issues that have been discussed and hence do not repeat information except when necessary. Koester (2004) notes that ‘the structure and characteristics of business letters, faxes and e-mails give us an insight into