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WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION: SITUATING WORKPLACE EMAILS IN THE BROADER CONCEPTS OF CMC & CMD

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I. INTRODUCTION

The present study is concerned with providing a detailed analysis of computer mediated discourse, henceforth, CMD, in different corporate sectors in the general framework of discourse analysis, henceforth, DA. Computer-mediated discourse is the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers. The study of CMD is a specialization within the broader interdisciplinary study of computer-mediated communication, henceforth, CMC, distinguished by its focus on language and language use in computer networked environments, and by its use methods of discourse analysis to address the focus. Most CMC currently in use is text-based, that is, messages are typed on a computer keyboard and read as text on a computer screen, typically by a person or persons at a different location from the message sender. Text-based CMC takes a variety of forms, for example email, discussion groups, real-time chat, virtual reality role-playing games, whose linguistic properties vary depending on the kind of messaging system use and the social and cultural context embedding particular instances of use. However, all such forms have in common that the activity that takes place through them is - constituted primarily – in many cases, exclusively – by visually-presented language through the mediation of computers. Thus the characteristics of the medium have important consequences for understanding the nature of computer-mediated language. They also provide a unique environment, free from competing influences from other channels of communication and from physical context, in which to study verbal interaction and the relationship between discourse and social practice.

As mentioned above, CMC takes a variety of forms as people engage in complex behaviours on the internet; from forming interpersonal relationships to implementing systems of group governance. These behaviours are constituted through and by means of discourse: language in doing; in the truest performative sense. Although CMC is increasingly becoming multi-modal; semiotic symbols in addition to text are becoming available for conveying meaning and “doing things” online (Searle), yet textual communication remains an important online activity.

At the outset therefore, the researcher wishes to clarify a few points about the considerations that have been incorporated for the present study. Thus CMD in the present study limits itself to only the emails and not all the other varieties mentioned above. This is because, the present study is a study of CMD in the corporate sector, and emails take the form of CMD in the corporate sector. Email has grown exponentially in the last two decades as the most preferred form of communication in the workplaces (see section 1.3 below for a detailed discussion on the growth of emails in the workplace, across the world).

The present study is essentially qualitative in nature. It is only qualitative data that is able to show the complexity of email messages and some of the interesting strategies that people employ to make their directives less face threatening.

With quantification the temptation exists to slot everything into categories determined by the analyst, categories which are based on his/her presumptions about the relationships between the different elements. The patterns that emerge are thus based on what the analyst has decided to count and how they have decided to weigh the different variables. Quantitative analysis thus has limitations, not the least of which is that it masks the richness of the data hidden behind the very vulnerable figures. To support, enrich and supplement the quantitative data, qualitative data is included. Its role is to unpack what lies behind the numbers produced by the quantitative data.

Having laid down the important considerations of this study, this paper will explain the concepts of CMC, CMD, synchronicity and corporate sector. This will be followed by an explanation of the growth and rapid expansion of emails, which have replaced traditional modes of official communication like memos, letters and face-to-face communication, in business houses.

II. CMC- COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Throughout the years, humans have consistently advanced their communication practices. From sign language to face to face speaking, from the early alphabet to letter writing, to telegram, and telephone, are just some of the advancements. The digital age has changed the way we communicate today. The evolution of the computer from a gigantic, unaffordable, computational gadget to a small, affordable, personal tool has made technologically mediated communication a popular way to communicate with friends, relatives, and even strangers across the globe. A close look at the fairly recent phenomenon of human-to-human communication via networked computers reveals that communication through computer networks originated in the United States in the late 1960's to facilitate the transfer of computer programs and data between remote computers in the interests of national defense (Levy, 1984; Rheingold, 1993). In the early 1970's (Hafner & Lyon, 1996), computer networks as a means of interpersonal communication caught on among computer scientists. Academicians from elite universities and business executives from elite organisations began the use of networked computers for communication in the 1980's. The rise of commercial Internet service providers in the 1990's facilitated its popular use that we see today.

The internet and the emerging communication technologies have greatly impacted both our personal and professional lives. So rapid has been its expansion, that the internet has penetrated universities (Haugh 105), businesses and homes. This rapid expansion of the internet and the electronic medium has led to the emergence of a significant new field of study called computer-mediated communication, henceforth CMC, because of its widespread use and influences in interpersonal, organizational, and pedagogical settings. Computer mediated communication is said to occur when two or more individuals interact and/or influence each other via separate computers through the Internet or a network connection, using a software. CMC "refers to person-to-person communication . . . over computer networks" (Pickering & King 479). CMC does not include the technicalities by which two networked computers transfer data, but rather with how people communicate using computers. The focus of the term CMC has evolved with the advent of mobile communication. In more recent applications, the broad definition of CMC includes both audio-visual media such as interactive video and voice mail and text-based systems such as emails and text messaging through the use of smart phones which does not require a person to sit at the computer for engaging in CMC.

Crystal persuasively argues that computer mediated language represents the fourth medium of communication development in human history, with spoken language, written language and sign language representing the first three. A great deal of research evidence exists that demonstrates the potential for CMC "to sustain and even enhance human communication" (Walther qtd in Thurlow1). These same reasons make it difficult to make any generalizations about CMC for as Herring notes, "CMC is clearly affected by technological variables such as synchronicity, granularity (i.e., how long or short text may be), and multimodality (for example., whether or not graphics, audio, and video are included)" (qtd in Thurlow1). Also, according to Thurlow,

...there is also a range of social variables that empirical research shows influences the nature and experience of CMC, such as the amount of time participants spend online (Walther & Burgoon, 1992), the nature of their relationship (Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001), and their levels of motivation (Utz, 2000).

CMC is thus not a homogeneous communication but is heterogeneous and is "affected by the numerous social structural and social situational factors which surround and define the communication taking place" (Yates 46).

The systems that support CMC "include electronic mail, computer conferencing, computer bulletin boards . . . and related media" (Rice.69). Thus, although the term is used to refer to a wide variety of communications systems--

ranging from electronic mail over corporate local area networks to the international scholarly conferences distributed over the Internet to listserves, usenet groups, chat rooms, and the like --there are aspects of this medium that remain constant in all its forms.

Most CMC is text based. Typically, messages are typed on a computer keyboard and read as text on a computer screen by a person or persons at different location. The linguistic properties of text based CMC vary depending upon the kind of messaging system used, the context of use and the social and cultural norms that govern the communicators. However, all text based CMC have one thing in common that is, communication is primarily constituted by visually presented language. This electronic language “approximates both writing and speech depending on which linguistic variable is measured. For instance, lexical density approaches written style, whereas pronoun use is more in line with spoken style” (Skovholt & Svennevig 42). These characteristics of the medium have important consequences for understanding the nature of computer-mediated language. Since communication is primarily constituted through visually presented language that is free from physical context and other channels of communication, CMC provides a unique environment in which to study verbal interaction and the relationship between discourse and social practice.

Asynchronous CMC

Text-based asynchronous CMC is communication that does not require participants to be online and available at the same time or place in order for communication to take place successfully. Messages are composed off-line, giving the sender the benefit of time for planning and editing the message. Email is a typical example of asynchronous CMC. Production and consumption of messages can occur at the respective paces of sender and receiver (Yates), thus sharing properties of traditional written interaction.

It could be argued that there are different levels of synchronicity. There are several factors involved in the levels of asynchronicity between email and SMS, for example. A person has to be by a computer and have an email client access a network to check for new messages, whereas participants in SMS communication may communicate from anywhere, because of the mobile nature of the means of expression. Furthermore, there is no action required for an SMS to be received by a mobile phone, other than that the phone must be switched on at some point. This argument against an email, is quickly losing ground as more and more people are using smart phones and emails have also become ‘mobile’ as one can access an email anywhere and anytime on their smart mobile phones.

However, in most cases, asynchronous interaction does not occur in real time, but the time for delivering messages in considerably decreased, compared to traditional “snail mail”. Even though it is not required that sender and receiver are online simultaneously in asynchronous interaction, it is possible that they are, in which case messages may be sent and received within seconds. A message might not be read or responded to until much later, though. Under such circumstances, there are clear differences between email and spoken interaction that go beyond the use of text as a medium. In some text-based CMC one can get feedback that the message is received (some email clients and almost all mobile phones allow this), but not that it is actually read. Getting feedback that the message is received is possible in face-to-face interaction by the reactions in the listener. Something similar is also possible in spoken interaction over the phone, but perhaps to a lesser extent due to limited modalities involved. Getting to know whether the message is actually shared and comprehended is another matter, though.

Synchronous CMC

Like spoken interaction, synchronous CMC requires its interlocutors to be online simultaneously. Unlike spoken face-to-face interaction and similar to telephone conversation, the interlocutors do not have to be present in the same physical room. Synchronous CMC allows written communication to become interactive written discourse (Ferrara, Brunner et al. 56). Most synchronous CMC is text-only, and thus mono-modal. Communication relies solely on what can be communicated through text and other graphic means. It should be pointed out, though, that clients for audio-and video chat are available as well, perhaps not used as extensively as text-only CMC at present.

Examples of synchronous CMC are various forms of real-time chat (web chat, IRC, etc.), in which a large number of people may participate in written conversation. The communicative situation could be compared to that of a cocktail

party, albeit a virtual one. Users type their written contributions to the conversation, which are displayed in the chat window to everybody that is logged in. Similar to a cocktail party, one may overhear, or rather “oversee”, other conversations going on in the chat room. As in a real-world situation it is difficult to take part actively in more than one or two conversations simultaneously, the main criticism of Crystal’s rather optimistic and hypothetical view.

No synchronous CMC is fully synchronous in the way spoken face-to-face interaction is: there is always the lag and delay of typing and sending the message. As mentioned above, Crystal points out that chat rooms, IRC and the like are too constrained by their response times and the slow speed of typing to be considered as a good analogy of speech (109). ‘Synchronous’ CMC is in this respect merely ‘quasi-synchronous’. For the sake of simplicity, the term ‘synchronous CMC’ will nevertheless be used henceforth to refer to the quasi-synchronous chat mode.

Gradations in the levels of simultaneity are closely linked to the notions of 1-way or 2-way communication, which means whether sender and receiver are able to see the message as it is being produced or not. A web chat or IRC requires the sender to type a message and hit the enter key or click a button before it is sent off and appears in the communication window of the chat. In split-screen protocols, such as featured in the chat modes Face book and Orkut, the synchronous chat displays the communication keystroke-by-keystroke in real time and gives the receiver awareness that the sender is producing his or her message. MUDs (Multi-User Domains) or MOOs (Multi-User Domains, Object-Oriented) are versions of chat rooms where pairs or larger groups of individuals can get together to “converse” through text messages.

Table 1 Classification of Some Common CMD Modes According to Medium Variables.

	One-way transmission	Two – way transmission
Synchronous	Chat (IRC, Webchat)	Facebook, Orkut, etc.
Asynchronous	Email, email based system (Listserv discussion lists, Usenet groups, etc.)	

December contends that important aspects of CMC are synchronicity, information richness, and social presence. CMC varies according to the technologies, on which it is based, and according to its contexts of use. Thus synchronous CMC (e.g., real time chat) differs systematically from asynchronous CMC in message length, complexity, formality, and interactivity – due, in part, to temporal constraints on message production and processing (Ko; Herring).

Social presence theorist concentrate more upon the specific characteristics of the cues being exchanged in mediated interactions. One of the most important cue characteristics exchanged in mediated interactions is speed. Put simply, the more speed associated with the exchange of cues in a mediated interaction, the higher “social presence” associated with that medium.

III. COMPUTER MEDIATED DISCOURSE

Within the broader study of CMC, there has emerged a field of specialization called computer mediated discourse, henceforth, CMD. CMD includes all kinds of interpersonal communication, email, instant messaging, web discussion boards, chat channels and the like that are carried out via networked computers between the communicators. CMD uses the methods of discourse analysis to focus on and to study language and language use in computer networked environments. The term ‘Computer-Mediated Discourse’ as a label for this kind of research was first used, to the best of my knowledge, at a pre-session of the Georgetown University Round Table on Languages

and Linguistics that was organized in March of 1995) but the study of CMD developed as early as 1984 alongside of the interactive networking itself. In the year 1984, Naomi Baron studied *Computer-Mediated Communication as a Force in Language Change*. In 1985, Denise Murray gave a detailed description of computer-mediated discourse research on real time messaging system at IBM. Yet, it was not until 1991 when Kathleen Ferrara, Hans Brunner and Greg Whitemore published *Interactive Written Discourse as an Emergent Genre*, that linguists began to take serious notice of CMD. The following years saw a lot of work on the empirical description of computer-mediated language and varieties of computer-mediated discourse and since then CMD research has continued to expand staking new areas of inquiry. The immediately following years saw the rise of a wave of CMD researchers, working independently on the quantitative and qualitative description of computer-mediated language and varieties of computer-mediated discourse.

IV. CORPORATE SECTOR

The business sector or corporate sector is the part of the economy made up by companies. The three main corporate sectors are the primary sector (raw materials), the secondary sector (manufacturing) and the tertiary sector (sales and services).

The Indian corporate sector has two main components, namely, the government owned and privately owned companies. The size of both the components, in terms of both numbers and capital, has grown fast, particularly since beginning of the seventies (Goyal²). Government companies are mainly in the basic, heavy and capital intensive industries whereas the private sector is predominantly in industries which cater to the consumer markets directly. It is due to such a basic difference that while the government sector accounts for nearly two-thirds of the productive industrial capital, its share in the net value added is less than one-third. And the opposite is true of the private sector (Goyal²).

V. EMAIL AND ITS RAPID GROWTH:

Within the specialized field of asynchronous CMD are electronic mails, henceforth emails. Emails are proving to be powerful tools of communication with capabilities of reaching out to a large number of recipients, cutting across geographical boundaries within split seconds and at the click of a simple button. The last twenty years have seen a widespread adoption of email as a means of workplace communication. Wasiak et al., point out that “Over the past decade, email has progressed from being a personal information communication technology to one that is centrally managed, archived and critical to daily business operations” (45). 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” (2). Email is now the official medium of communication in many workplaces as it can reach out to audiences within, across, and outside organizational boundaries (Rice 110). Communication tasks at the workplace that were previously accomplished through face-to-face conversation or telephone have now been largely replaced by emails. Emails have replaced written memos and the traditional official letters to a large extent. Michael Kinsley, editor of Microsoft’s interactive magazine *Slate* describes his transition into Microsoft work culture that illustrates the ubiquitous role that email has begun to play in the corporate sector, this way:

Shortly after I arrived, I met someone who’d just joined Microsoft from Nintendo North America—a similar high tech, post-industrial, shorts-and-sandals sort of company, one would suppose. So I asked him how is Microsoft different? He said, ‘At Microsoft, the phone never rings.’ [Emphasis added] (Kinsley qtd in Baron 137).

Gains underlines three unique characteristics of e-mail as a communication medium, these, according to him account for the explosion in the use and preference of e-mails across the workplace. First, email is asynchronous, in that it does not require the real life existence of sender and receiver for communication to occur. Second, email provides recipients with text written messages. Third, email can address multiple recipients in a single action and senders can distribute messages quickly and easily as it is convenient and relatively low cost (82).

The uniqueness of email as a communication medium is also because of its intrinsic nature as an oral-written hybrid medium. As written medium, it allows its users intense, regular, and potentially persistent contact with their own discourse, with the potential of met linguistic awareness (even “hyperawareness”) of written language (Rowe 238) and as an oral-linked medium, its turns are often short and frequent (Baron 136). Already, written language is less spontaneous than oral language. But in the workplace, email—unlike the old-fashioned office memo encourages small, frequent communications. Furthermore, with its “include previous message” feature, it also serves as an efficient correspondence and recordkeeping tool (Waldvogelqtd in Rowe 19).

Rogen International, an Australian Consultancy’s 2001 survey revealed that executives spent at least a global average of two hours a day on email. According to this survey, in 1995, employees sent 3 emails per day and received 5; whereas in 2001, the same employees sent an average of 20 emails and received an average of 30 per day. Another survey carried out in 2012 by a technology market research firm, The Radicati Group reported that the number of email accounts is slated to increase to 4.3 billion worldwide by 2016 from 3.1 billion in 2011. According to this survey, 89 billion business emails are sent and received each day. In a survey conducted in 2011, it was found that 105 messages are sent and received daily by a typical corporate employee. An earlier survey conducted by the same group in 2001, revealed that 85 per cent of participants agreed that email has improved organisational communication.

Email has revolutionised workplace communication and has changed the way people communicate at work. It has been established that email is more effective and more versatile a medium than the prevailing forms of organizational communication. According to Baron, even within email, there is vast linguistic variation (162). She notes that “email is a communicative modality in flux” and more “a moving linguistic target than a stable system” (144). In their study, Nahar Al-Ali and Sahawneh (40-64) state that e-mail has “pragmatic and social functions.” The pragmatic function is obvious in its use in the academic and business environments. The social function consists in the mail’s privacy in that it enables participants to interact in a less constrained way than when face-to-face. (Baron 205)

Email is thus not only a valuable tool to convey transactional information but is equally suited for doing relational work. Sproull and Kiesler, for instance, emphasise the various advantages of email for interpersonal relationships among colleagues. They note that “[t]hereal value of [email] could be increased sociability and organisational attachment [...] it is a relatively efficient medium for sociability” (1511). Emails are therefore crucial to any analysis of workplace communication, and more specifically are very important data that helps in exploration of the ways in which workplace relations are constructed and negotiated throughout people’s working days.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study aims to contribute to the research on email communication, particularly, workplace email communication by presenting a comprehensive understanding of the constructs of CMC, CMD and synchronicity. This is followed by a brief description of the meaning of the phrase ‘Corporate Sector’. The growth of emails as a powerful tool of workplace communication together with the nature of email and the area of scholarly interest email has generated, is then provided, and with it, the rationale for focussing on emails for understanding workplace communication.