

An Analysis of Recreational Email Messages

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Abstract

This study focuses on one form of Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) that is, email. As email is a silent mode of communication, a wide range of communicative strategies (CSs) is employed by email users. Therefore, this study explores the various types of CSs employed by male and female teenagers when communicating with their friends in the website – www.friendster.com. The reasons for employing the various CSs and influence of gender on the use of CSs will also be discussed.

A total of 123 email messages form the corpus for this study were contributed by 12 teenage students. Two instruments (interview questions and questionnaire) were developed for the collection of information and data. A modified taxonomy of CSs was drawn based on Segerstad's study on CMC language. A mixed methodology design that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches is used in study. Simple frequency count on the occurrence of CSs employed by both male and female samples was used to analyse the data. A pilot test was conducted on 2 samples (1 male and 1 female) to test the feasibility of the research questions, research methods and the taxonomy. Then, a detailed discussion on the salient CSs, reasons for employing the various CSs and influence of gender on the used of CSs is presented.

Keywords

E-mail, Communicative Strategies

Introduction

Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) has become a popular medium for communication with the emergence of the Internet and development in computer science. Email, which is one of the ways of CMC, has a new fascinating hybrid of language. "Netspeak" (Crystal's term) is neither spoken nor written language which means it adapts certain features of speech as well as writing to accommodate the new medium. Besides, other features that are neither speech- nor writing-like, non-standardised, playful, highly deviant from the

language rules, tolerant of typographic and spelling errors, and 'new words', are typical in e-mail (Crystal, 2001). Email users have to adapt their language creatively to suit this silent mode of communication. Therefore, CSs are employed consciously or intentionally in the course of communication to convey ideas as effective as possible. It is thus the aim of this study to identify the CSs used to compose emails by male and female teenagers, explain the reasons for using certain CSs and examine the influence of gender on the use of CSs.

This paper is divided into the following sections: a discussion on CSs and taxonomy of CSs for e-mail messages and gender and communication strategies; the research methodology employed in this study; and a description and analysis of the use of CSs and reasons for the employment of various CSs.

1 CSs And A Taxonomy Of CSs For E-Mail Messages

When emailers experience discrepancy between their communicative intentions and their limited communicative resources, they resort to problem-solving devices known as communication strategies (CSs) or known as strategic competence. CSs are conscious or unconscious processes which people make use of in using a language. They are considered important tools for communicators in both FTF and CMC as these strategies can help them get their intended messages across.

As e-mail has few established norms of interaction and there is no specific guide on the common standards or expectations for email users when they join the online culture, therefore, emailers create their styles and language based on their knowledge and experience of related or pre-existing genres (Mulholland, 1999). This "third medium" of online language variety is in its evolving process of having its own systematic rules to suit the new circumstances (Crystal, 2001).

In her study on CMC language, Segerstad (2002) has developed a taxonomy of linguistic features which have been found to be characteristic

of emails. Based on her taxonomy, a modified taxonomy has been reproduced to suit my study on CSs employed by teenagers when composing e-mails. The 5 categories in my modified taxonomy include:

1. Orthography
2. Vocabulary
3. Paralinguistics and Graphics
4. Syntactic Features
5. Discourse and Text

2 Gender Communication and Strategies

Gender differences in speech is an expectation imposed on the society that is, we either behave as a man or woman in accepted forms in communication. Lakoff (1973) reveals that men and women do not speak different languages. Generally, there are some characteristics of both sexes in FTF communication. Men speak in a faster, higher, rougher and direct tone without much hesitation. Whilst, women speak by using tag questions, qualifiers and fillers so as to soften their speech and thus, they avoid direct rough and threatening language. Women also tend to speak more slowly and clearly.

One feature of women's conversational pattern studied by Hirschmann (1973) and Coates (1986a) is minimal responses (cited in Holmes (1986). Hirschmann found that women have a greater tendency of using minimal responses such as "mm-hmm" and "uh-huh" in conversations than men do and attributed this to women's supportiveness in interactions. Beside that, Hirschmann also discovered greater female use of the "fillers" (e.g. uhm, well, you know), "qualifiers" (eg. maybe, sort of, I think) and the "affirmative" responses (eg. yeah) as markers of supportiveness as well. These features are also used by men but they appear less in their conversation.

A noticeable difference in the language used in CMC shows that "men and women have recognizably different styles in posting to the Internet" and that "women and men have different communicative ethics" Herring (1994). She also proposes that such differences are the result of the differences of culturisation and integration into society.

As there have been contrasting styles and features in both FTF and online communication between the two sexes as well as the paucity of work done in the area of gender influence on CSs used in communication, it is hoped that the present study will reveal the influence of gender on the use of CSs especially in email context.

3 Research Method

This study examines a corpus of 123 e-mail messages sent by 12 teenagers to their friends in the website, www.friendster.com for recreational purposes.

Two sets of instruments were used in this study. Interviews 1 and 2 were aimed to garner personal information and seek clarifications on the content email messages as well as the reasons for using the different communicative strategies. The questionnaire was employed to elicit samples' views on the use of various communicative strategies.

The data was manually tabulated by using frequency count based on the linguistic features of email listed in the modified taxonomy.

4 Data Analysis

The analysis is generally divided into 3 parts:

- frequency distribution of the various types of CSs used
- reasons for employing the various CSs, and
- frequency of occurrence of each strategy type for each gender.

References

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