IMPACT OF E-BUSINESS AND PERSONAL COMMUNICATION ON EMAIL LANGUAGE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Email is a generic term for messages composed and transmitted from one computer to another on a network. The style of email composition is believed to be 'modified' in comparison to traditional ways of conveying written messages. Millions of emails are exchanged between employees of organizations to carry our business and a bigger number is exchanged between people in the social context across the world. Majority of these messages are written in English. As we keep switching between professional and social roles frequently, the style varies from situation to situation, according to the relationship and the subject matter. The more we engage ourselves in communication through emails the more we are influenced by this new channel. This is giving rise to a linguistic revolution. This paper presents the results of the study conducted to gauge the influence of Emails on the Lingua franca of the Internet used in e-business and personal contexts.

Index Terms—Emails, English, Linguistic, Business Communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Internet has changed the way we do business. Access to potential customers and partners is no more limited to local region or country. Also the barriers of space and time have been breached. Email is one of the revolutionary technologies which have helped achieve new dimensions in business. It has also helped more and more people communicate with each other and forge varied relationships. All this is done with one common element – the English Language. With so much of English language corpus being created everyday by people who are constantly changing roles between professional and personal context, it is imperative that language also undergoes a transformation.

English, as a language has been subject to change form the time it was created. And time and again it has been abused in some form or the other, primarily by the virtue of the physical mode (oral, written, telephonic) we choose to use. At the same time, each mode while having its own specific characteristics, also enhanced language by adding either to its structure or syntax. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has made English as the lingua Franca of the online community, but its advent is being seen as having a destructive influence on many aspects of the language.

The exchange made possible through internet, between people who do not share the same social background and come, in many cases, from different cultures, by means of a code in which the promptness of conversation converts writing into amateurish effort, make us to consider communication from a new viewpoint.

E-mail messages are generally believed to be written in informal language i.e. compressions, spelling mistakes, omissions etc. The receiver is assumed to understand the intended meaning. This gives ground to misinterpretatione and confusion. As a result credibility suffers.

It is always beneficial to have opening greetings and closing statements in an email. The message must be concise. This becomes important as employees have to deal with a large number of messages everyday in modern organizations. At the same time, the message must be clear also.

2. LITERATUTE REVIEW

Emails have become an integral part of professionals work life and the employers expect competence in writing skills. Baron has discussed stylistic features such as the length of messages, abbreviated and verbose forms, and informality. These features, Baron suggests, have made the style of email 'reminiscent of telegraphic language' [1].

Similarly, Crystal has produced an extensive study of internet language and has asserted that the electronic revolution has brought about a linguistic revolution, resulting in 'Netspeak', 'a genuine new medium' [2]. In addition, Collot and Belmore have indicated that the nature of the language used in emails is closer to the spontaneous genres like speeches and interviews than to the informational genres such as official documents [3].

Douglas Biber and Edward Finegan documented "historical drift" in a number of genres of English, including personal and professional letters [4]. Analyzing samples of texts on six dimensions of linguistic variation, they found that over the last three centuries these genres have been moving in an "oral" direction.

The Plain Language movement flourished in the United States and Britain in the late 1970s. This movement was for reforming the bureaucratic language to make it more comprehensible to laypersons. Although language reformers did not expressly set out to make documents more like speech, this was, in fact, the effect of the changes they introduced. In reforms, they preferred active to passive verbs, and verbs with first and second person pronouns instead of nominalizations.

The electronic mediums are also having an impact. Long years of exposure to films and television have partially re-instated the prominence of speech that characterized oral cultures.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A two pronged approach was taken to collect data for the study. Survey Questionnaire was used to gather data on 'Perceptual' usage of language from the respondents, while actual emails were gathered for gauging the 'Practical' usage of language. The variables used in the questionnaire are: Use of Verbs, Conjunctions and Prepositions, Spellings and Fragmented Sentences, Use of Lengthy Sentences, Use of Self absorbed or Reader Oriented Content, Use of Conversational Tone, Use of Punctuation, Use of Short and Long Paragraphs and Spacing, Use of Compressed words and Abbreviations, Use of Capitalization, Use of Typographic Extremes, Use of Emoticons and Use of Transliteration. The same variables were used in personal observation for practical usage.

Emails: Emails were collected from students, faculty, friends, and professionals. It was made sure that the participants are well versed with the online channel of communication and are comfortable with the functioning of email services. For the study purpose emails were classified into two categories, namely Formal and Informal context. Formal context is described as writing emails in professional context i.e. to seniors, colleagues, peers outside organization, groups, companies and strangers. Informal context is the one where we write emails to friends, relatives, informal groups, clubs and forums. Another important factor which was considered was the 'relationship' between the sender and the receiver. If the 'relationship' shared was informal, the exchange was considered as happened in Informal context. Each and every email was carefully scrutinized for 'presence' or 'absence' of a particular parameter. A total of 200 emails were collected and classified in Formal and Informal (100) each. Once the survey was completed and emails studied and marked for 'absence' or 'presence' of a particular parameter, the responses were tabulated with YES or NO answer. The responses were summarized and then used for

analysis. After compilation the data was subjected to statistical analysis, which used the 'description' approach.

4. FINDINGS IN COMPOSED EMAILS

Figure 1.1 clearly demarcates the various parameters which dominate a particular context for written emails. In case of Formal email context following elements dominated the language composition:

- Proper use of Parts of Speech (Verbs, Prepositions and Conjunctions)
- Proper Spellings and Complete sentences
- Receiver oriented Language
- Proper Punctuation
- Short Paragraphs
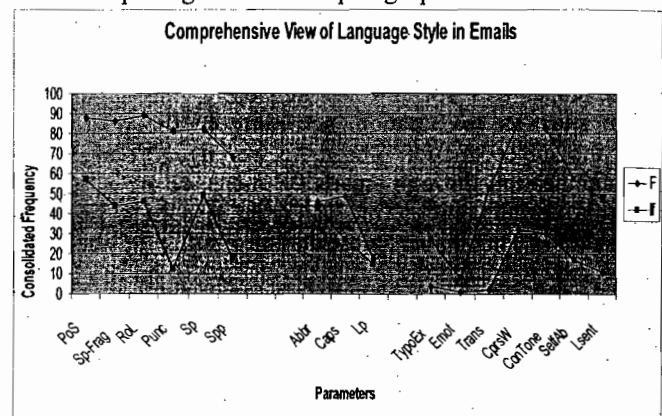- Spacing between the paragraphs

Figure 1.1 Comprehensive View of the Findings in Written Emails

In case of Informal email Context following elements dominated the language composition:
- Typographic Extremes
- Emoticons
- Transliteration
- Compresses words
- Conversational Tone
- Self Absorbed Language
- Long Sentences

The following parameters were found to be used in both contexts in equal measure except Capitalization. The fact that more people are using capitalization in formal context can be attributed to the fact that over a period of time employees of the same organization, professional of the same domain tend to get used to using certain terms/phrases in a particular way (such as project names, project variables, key people involved, tasks and processes.)

- Capitalization
- Abbreviations
- Long Paragraphs

It is also important to note that the factors like professional seriousness of matter, professional credibility, relationship shared by two parties etc also contribute to the style of composition of email. In the above grouping of parameters, it can be observed that Typographic Extremes, Emoticons (written form of nonverbal cues), Transliteration, Abbreviations, Compresses words, Long Paragraphs, Conversational Tone, Self Absorbed Language and Long Sentences contribute to oral and therefore informal tone to the composition. Abbreviations and Compresses words are devices to help convey the message as fast as possible, since we can't type as fast as we speak. Other devices enhance readers' and writers' ability to experience the words as if they were spoken. We rarely, if ever, encounter them in formal genres of paper-based writing such as business letters or reports, because we are taught to avoid them. On the other hand Proper use of Parts of Speech (Verbs, Prepositions and Conjunctions), Proper Spellings and Complete sentences, Receiver oriented Language, Proper Punctuation, Short Paragraphs, Spacing between the paragraphs, Capitalization render a professional and hence a formal tone to the composition.

5. FINDINGS IN QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

Figure 1.2 clearly demarcates the various parameters which dominate a particular context for questionnaire survey. In case of Formal email context following elements dominated the language composition:

- Proper use of Parts of Speech (Verbs, Prepositions and Conjunctions)
- Proper Spellings and Complete sentences
- Receiver oriented Language
- Proper Punctuation
- Short Paragraphs
- Spacing between the paragraphs
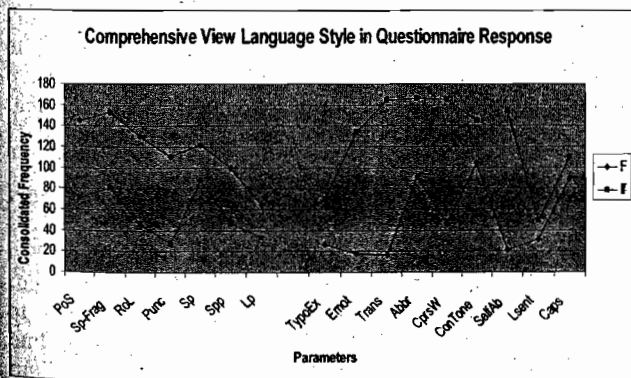- Use of Long Paragraphs

Figure 1.2 Comprehensive View of the Findings in Questionnaire

In case of Informal email context following elements dominated the language composition:

- Typographic Extremes
- Emoticons
- Transliteration
- Abbreviations
- Compresses words
- Capitalization
- Conversational Tone
- Self Absorbed Language
- Long Sentences

To see the difference between perception and practice of language while using emails for communication in the two contexts mentioned, I have marked attributes for low (1) or high (2) occurrence in questionnaire response and in written emails. Figure 1.3 shows the comparative picture of the 'perception' and 'practice' of the new medium of email in Formal context.
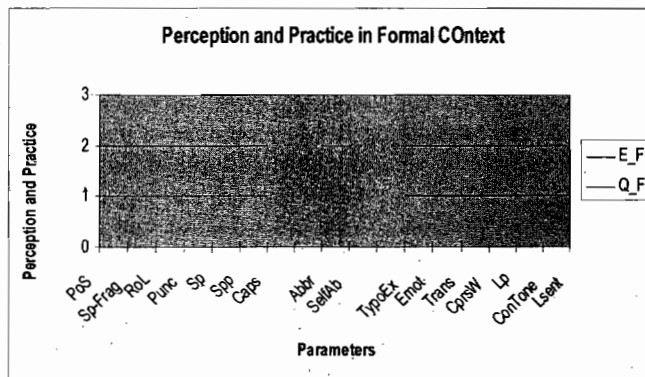

Figure 1.3 Comparative View of Perception and Practice in Formal Context

From figure 1.3 we can deduce that while less number of people thinks that they follow the formal language rules, in practice, more people are actually following the language dictum. At the same time more number of users thinks that they tend to indulge in relaxing language rules but in practice less number of users are doing it. The deviation is in use of abbreviations and incomplete sentences where less number of people thinks that they use these but actually more number of people are doing it.
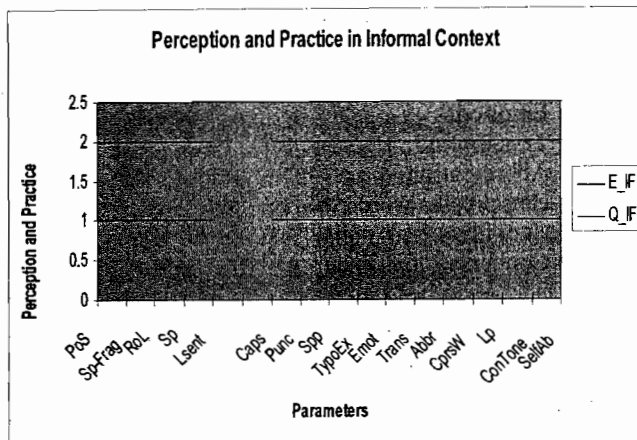
Figure 1.4 Comparative View of Perception and Practice in InFormal Context

Figure 1.4 shows the comparative picture of the 'perception' and 'practice' of the new medium of email in InFormal context. A diagonally opposite observation can be made in the Informal context. While less number of people think that they violate language rules, in practice more number of users are doing it. More number of users thinks that they indulge in using the mutated form of language but in practice, less number is using it.

6. FORMAL AND INFORMAL STYLE OF EMAIL

The analysis of written emails and questionnaire responses has revealed certain patterns of the use of parameters considered. Also, the perception of users about email has reflected the common belief that CMC is destructive for language but in practice that is not the case. This section discusses the usage patterns.

Verbs, Conjunctions and Prepositions: Action description, connectivity of content and relationship between different entities in the text are essential features of effective writing. To achieve this, it is important to understand and use the three parts of speech (PoS) namely verbs, conjunctions and prepositions. Informal context, as in communication with a friend or a relative, provides flexibility to mutate the use of the PoS. The reasons can be many, for instance, we are not conscious of language correctness, we have less concern for receivers skills, we have no fear of unwanted criticism over use of linguistic details, our casual approach and of course the change in lifestyle (mobile revolution). All these reasons are taken care of in formal context such as communication with a colleague or superior, business partner and stakeholders.

Spellings and Sentence Fragments: Spellings are one of most ignored aspects of CMC. Spelling mistakes may appear trivial but it is also one of the first things that the reader will notice in the message. Eliminating spelling and grammatical errors becomes very important for academic and professional communication. As we practice more and more of email communication, our dependence on technology increases. 'Spell check' is one utility to minimize spelling errors but this itself is error prone. Here's a partial list of the errors that spell check will not catch:

- *to two too*
- *they're their there*
- *you're your*
- *weight wait*
- *lose loose*

A sentence fragment is any group of words which is broken, comma spliced, incomplete or unfinished. The author of the message may think he knows what he means to say in the writing, but it may come out as a sentence fragment or incomplete thought, and the reader may not be able to make sense of it. Again the fragment sentence conveys that the author is not clear in his thoughts and is not sure what he wants to convey; and this can have further consequences. Informal context violates this dictum. Lots of fragmented sentences, incomplete and meaningless thoughts were observed in informal context. The occurrence of same in formal context was marginal.

Sentence Length: Grammatically correct long sentences are more difficult for readers than short sentences. At times we tend to put several unrelated details into one sentence. When we write, we write in sentences. We start the sentence with capital letter; construct phrases and clauses through words to express a meaningful and complete thought. We mark the endpoint with a period, question mark, or exclamation mark.

Similarly, the reader will follow the sentence structure – word by word from beginning to end trying to decipher the single complete thought the writer is expressing. In order for readers to do that, our writing needs to flow smoothly from word to word, phrase to phrase, and sentence to sentence. In Informal context emails entire emails were constructed with only one long sentence while in Formal context, users included both short and long sentences.

Self-absorbed or Reader Oriented Language: Irrespective of the reason and message to be addressed, it is important to remember that the aim is to communicate to the reader. It is important to write with the reader in mind. This is not a new concept; however, it is difficult to achieve. It becomes more important in case of online communication tools such as an email where the medium can inflict its own flavor on the writing. Assuming certain things about the reader may render the communication useless. It is not necessary that the kind of online skills we have, our readers also have the same skills. Online medium

extends its own variety which must be used judiciously, if at all used.

The use of incomplete sentences / run-ons and inappropriate vocabulary renders a self absorbed approach to writing. It is difficult to define the reader oriented language. In general terms, it can be said that reader oriented language is one which coveys the message, keeping in mind the readers ability, in most simple terms abiding by the rules of language. In language research we can find the reference to reader oriented language as 'plain language'. Stienberg defines plain language as-

"language that reflects the interests and needs of the reader and consumer rather than the legal, bureaucratic, or technological interests of the writer or of the organization that the writer represents"[5].

Martin Cutts, research director of the Plain Language Commission in the United Kingdom, defines plain language as-

"The writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a cooperative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the document at the first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood"[6].

From the two definitions provided above, it is clear that all the factors mentioned above (avoiding medium specific nuances, fragmented sentences, domain specific terminology, appropriate vocabulary and coherent composition) must be taken care of to furnish a reader oriented message.

In general purpose oral and written communication people tend to use the language aspects which they feel comfortable with but in more formal situations the listener/ reader interest also comes into picture. In the former case people use self-absorbed language (Incomplete sentences, compressed words, Jargons, domain specific terminology) whereas in the later case it is required to adjust the language and content(most suitable word, details and connectivity) to the subject, the situation, or the person addressed. It was observed from the study that users take care of receiver's interest and ability in Formal context while in Informal context they ignored the use of reader oriented language.

Conversational Tone: Many users have adapted to conversational tone. We tend to write the way we talk. This can be effective in certain cases, but it can't be taken too far. Recent communication studies suggest that it is no more a taboo to use conversational tone in Formal context. At the same time it also warned that we need not over do it. People pay more attention when they are in conversation than, say in a lecture session. The retention is more in conversation.

Tone describes the attitude of a piece of writing: whether the writing is formal or informal, playful or serious, ironic or sincere. We can convey the tone in a number of ways. One way to gauge the tone is to observe the use of pronouns. The pronouns we use in our writing can indicate the relationship we have with our audience. For example, if we consider the relationship between self and the reader to be friendly, then we would likely use the first person ("I" or "we") to refer to ourself and the second person ("you") to address the reader. But traditionally it is believed to avoid using pronouns in formal writing. Many believe that 'you' carries a sense of informality, and in a sentence that gives advice or demands action, it may sound a little aggressive. Generally formal writing avoids pronouns that refer to the writer and readers because the emphasis is on the message, not on the sender or receiver and thus gives the writing an objective and a formal tone.

According to Nancy Flynn, the most effective tone for business correspondence is a professional, yet conversational, tone [7]. She advocates that it is hard to connect if we depersonalize our writing by eliminating all the pronouns. At the same time she also warns not to use inappropriate humor, clichés, compound constructions, redundant pairs etc. Observations from the study reveal that conversation tone is used mostly in Informal context but a growing number of users are making use of it in Formal context also.

Punctuation: Zhou, L. and Dongsong Zhang reports that punctuation plays an important role in representing the rhythm of the communication content and facilitating sentence processing during communication [8].

John Olsson says that the role of punctuation in not merely rhythmic but also syntactic [9]. It is not simply ornamental. Comma, for example, performs so many syntactic functions: it divides clauses - whether main clauses or dependent clauses - it separates noun phrases, it signals a break before a conjunction or after a conjunction, and so on.

Punctuation marks are signals to the readers. In speaking, the speaker can pause, stop, or change the tone of voice. In writing, it can be achieved by using the punctuation marks to emphasize and clarify what is meant. Using punctuation appropriately may help the message to flow much more smoothly, generally creating a more "intelligent" appearance.

The study revealed that punctuation is the most ignored and incorrectly used language aspect in emails in Formal

context while in Formal context; users take care of it most of the time.

Paragraph Structure: Writing for CMC is different from writing on paper. The medium (computer screen) presents a different kind of challenge. Generally speaking, paragraphing is a device used primarily to ensure the comfort of the reader, and secondarily as a structural guide for the writer. Content that is read from the computer screen is preferred to have shorter paragraphs than do articles read from a printed page. It is very difficult and uncomfortable to read long blocks of text on the computer, and it may not even be possible to keep track of where you are for more than a few lines. In addition to writing shorter paragraphs for the computer, we should also use double-space between paragraphs, because it is much easier to read a paragraph on a computer screen when it is framed by white space.

In the study, it was observed that in Formal context, users used short as well as long paragraphs and also used spacing between them. In Informal context, users generally used long paragraphs.

Word Compression and Abbreviations: Linguistic compression is one of the unique features of online communication, particularly emails and instant messaging. Language compression may occur in many forms. But it was observed that there are certain categories where they appear more frequently such as: Deletion of Vowels. (eg. square becomes sqre, circle becomes crcle). Since word recognition relies heavily on the first and last letters in a word, the opening vowel in words that has leading vowel/vowel groups needs retaining (such as aware becomes awre, and equality becomes eqlty).

In any language, part of the definition of the overall form that permits comprehension arises in the use of elements such as articles, pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions that provide significant contextual clues as to what's going on. For example: b - be (abbreviation/phonetic) and c - see (phonetic).

Many of the true 'dictionary' forms of English words contain archaic letter groupings which can be significantly compressed by means of their phonetic equivalents. Often, if the other rules of compression given here are applied, the use of phonetic forms may be unnecessary, but sometimes they are useful. For example: replace the letter group 'ght' by 't' or 'te' (tonight = tonite OR 2nte/2nt) and replace 'ph' by 'f' (phone = fone OR fne). The numerical forms 1, (won) 2, (to/too) 4, (for), 6 (six/sex) and 8 (eight) can also be useful provided they are easier and faster to access at the keypad/keyboard. For example:1drfl (wonderful), 2mrrw (tomorrow) and 2sdy (Tuesday).

Use of standard abbreviations is in vogue in modern email communication. And it is not considered offensive. But we need to take care that it shouldn't be over used. Users can use legitimate abbreviations to shorten e-mail messages only if the readers -- intended and hidden -- will recognise and understand them.

Abbreviations are now-a-days used as a way to save time and money (on typing) while communicating through emails in Informal context. Some of the abbreviations are natural and agreed upon while others are forced and sender oriented. Use of Abbreviated language may have practical use in rapid text messaging but this is restricted only to informal written conversations. As we move into the formal context only agreed upon abbreviations are used and that only when required. Compression of words to gain text economy is a new thing that email communication has offered to its users. For all communication instances except professional, users tend to forcibly compress words and mutate their structure.

Capitalization: According to Bill Poser, Capitalization is part of the social convention for writing English. Like the alphabet, it isn't something that the writing system makes available for manipulation by individual users [10].

Judith Callos opines that how we are perceived depends on whether our message, request or point of view will be taken seriously [11]. A primary example is making just a little effort by pressing shift key to capitalize the start of the sentences. Doing so can make all the difference in the world as to whether we will be perceived as someone who is a true professional. When we do not capitalize our name or the beginning of sentences, we are relaying several possible things about ourselves:

- we don't care if we are perceived as uneducated,
- we are uneducated,
- we are so lazy that we can't press the shift key when required.

None of the above is complimentary.

The violation of capitalization can occur in many ways. All letters can be capitalized. *THIS IS AN EXAMPLE, SOISTHIS.* All letters can be lowercase. *this is an example.* In BumpyCase or MixedCase, a part of the word is capitalized and words run together. First letter may or may not be capitalized. *ThisIsAnExample, soIsThis.* MixedCase with embedded underscore is also used, for instance - *THIS_IS_AN_EXAMPLE* or *this_is_an_example.*

But many in the modern world believe that it is a matter of style as Prof. Joseph Turow, faculty at the Annenberg

School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, says:

"The capitalization of the things seems to place an inordinate, almost private emphasis on something. The Internet, at least philosophically, should not be owned by anyone as it is a part of the neural universe of life." [12]

Capitalization is used to start a new sentence, name specific objects and ideas, direct quotes etc. and the orthography of each language has its own rules of using capitalization. Irrelevant capitalization renders the message poorly. In addition all caps message and all caps words within the email is a characteristic of email mode of CMC. All-caps might look good visually, but experienced users will write off the author as amateur. It's okay to use all-caps for headings and/or titles in your messages, or even to EMPHASIZE certain words, but anything beyond that is equivalent to screaming at someone. Regardless of your intention, people will react as if you meant to be aggressive. Capitalization can communicate excitement, emphasis and special interest for a place, object or person.

The fact that more people are using capitalization in formal context can be attributed to the fact that over a period of time employees of the same organization, professional of the same domain tend to get used to using certain terms/phrases in a particular way (such as project names, project variables, key people involved, tasks and processes).

Typographic extremes: Brenda Danet, in her research observed that there is a new playfulness in digital writing [13]. While it blossoms particularly in synchronous chat modes, it is also present in ordinary email. When users want to convey emotions or reactions to others, they use two kinds of expressions: typographic extremes and emoticons.

Typographic extremes are mutated verbal expressions like 'toooo' and 'whaaat'. In informal situations people tend to vent out their reactions without inhibitions via stretching, pausing etc., while in formal setting they tend to exercise restrain. Typographic mutations include Multiple punctuation **(Type back soon!!!!!!)**, Eccentric Spelling **(Type back sooooooooon)**, Capital letters **(I'M REALLY ANGRY AT YOU!)**, Asterisks for emphasis **(I'm really *angry* at you.)**, Written out laughter (hehehe, hahahaha), Smiley icons (:-),;-),:-( ) and Verbal/visual puns **(A t D h V a A n N k C s E, for advance thanks)**.

Emoticons: All of the nonverbal communication cues are missing when we communicate to someone using email. The information encoded in the tone, mimics and gestures is lost. In contrast to a phone call or talking in person, e-mail can be emotionally impoverished when it comes to

nonverbal messages that add nuance and value to our words. The typed words are denuded of the rich emotional context we convey in person or over the phone. Users of the email exploit this unique feature of computer mediated communication to convey subtle non-verbal messages. One of the most important and unique characteristics of the computer mediated communication is *emoticons*. Emoticons are emotional graphics--visual ways created out of symbols of typography to express the way you feel when the users think words alone just aren't enough. Various emotions such as anger, love, frustration, anxiety etc are conveyed through animated facial expressions in informal oral communication. Sometimes in Informal written communication this effect can be achieved by using harsh words and typographic extremes. But in case of formal context people tend to take more care with choice of words and are careful in conveying the anger, dissatisfaction and anxiety.

Transliteration: Transliteration is the practice of transcribing a word or text written in one writing system into another writing system. Users find it easy to switch to another language and use the writing system of the tool language to convey messages. Some mailers use transliterated words and phrases while others write complete paragraphs. One reason can be getting away with vocabulary requirement. They need not scout for appropriate word all the time and can easily get away by using a familiar word in the first language. Another reason can be confidentiality. If the user wants the message to be read and understood by an intended reader who is well versed with the first language, he/she can use transliteration to maintain some level of confidentiality. And of course time, speed and frequency of communication also has a role to play.

Sometimes transliteration is natural while at other times people don't find the correct word to use so they switch to other language to continue transmitting the message. Transliteration is more prominent in synchronous mode of communication but is also creeping in asynchronous form such as emails where both parties are comfortable with the languages used.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusions drawn from the study are:

- In 'Perception' the new medium is seen as a flexible medium to communicate and as having negative impact but in 'Practice' users follow the language dictum and the influence is minimal.
- The formal context emails are characterized by features resembling to Business letter stylistics to a great extent.

- The Informal context emails are characterized by features or an emergent style similar to oral communication stylistics.
- The influence of CMC on style is more in informal context than in formal.

The new medium of communication is flexible by virtue of which we can observe the deviation from traditional formal style and advent of mutated informal linguistic style. Although the new medium invites informality even in business or formal contexts, it would be a misnomer to attribute too much to the effect of technology as such. Rather, I believe that the new technology is strengthening, or converging with, a general cultural trend, which is already in place.

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