

Communicative efficiency and personalization in email language in an online learning environment

Draft version of a hypothesis-development paper

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Email language as competence

Some people write and understand emails better than others. To that extent, there is something about emails that can be learnt, and thus something that can be taught (there are indeed books and courses designed to do precisely that). We might therefore assume that email language involves a kind of competence, perhaps based on rules that must be learned and observed. Such rules might be:

1. Use the subject line for a concise description of the topic.
2. When replying to a message, automatically cite the previous message.
3. Make sure you are replying to the intended person (i.e. "Reply to all" or "Reply to sender").
4. Keep your message short.
5. If you are addressing two distinct topics, use two emails.
6. Use short sentences and short paragraphs.
7. Only use all caps if you are shouting.
8. Use and understand smileys and the like.

What kind of rules are these? Are they like those that might comprise grammatical competence (e.g. add -s to the stem for the third-person singular)? Not really. Virtually all the above rules are broken on a very regular basis, and yet email communication seems to proceed regardless. More exactly, some people write and understand emails better than others, but there are few real cut-off points at which one would question a specific competence, or where communication fails entirely. The rules would seem to have a relatively weak status.

Some possible reasons for the weak status of the rules:

1. The term "email" denotes a medium, not a fixed genre. Emails can be used to send quite formal letters, notifications of meetings, expressions of opinion, turns in a conversation, and much more. What we are dealing with here might thus be no more than a set of pointers, of less status than the rules of genre that are then implanted on the medium.
2. The application and recognition of the rules may be highly group-specific. We do not know if Spanish people use them in the same way as L1 English-speakers, or if people using them in the work environment use them in the same way as those writing emails for social interaction or pleasure, or if young people use them the same way as older people, or indeed if women use them the same way as men. Intuitively, one might expect significant differences with respect to all these variables. A rule that is almost mandatory for high-tech English-speaking men in the work environment may be virtually non-existent for adolescent Catalan-speaking girls participating in a discussion group about piercing, and vice-versa. (This particular example brings to mind the discursive

impact of SMS language, which is carried over into emails in some environments – new media do not operate alone.)

3. The rules exist but can be broken in order to create implicatures, in the manner of Grice's maxims of conversation. For example, an exceptionally short message, with no new subject line and no signature might break the established rules in order to say "treat this as part of a conversation – reply to me immediately". This begs the question as to whether such implicatures could concern anything more than the overlaps of genres, or could they produce implicatures akin to metaphors? Research is needed on this point.
4. The rules are all designed to ensure "communicative efficiency" of some kind, whereas some cultural groups and sub-genres may give value to things other than technical efficiency. Politeness conventions, for example, are often challenged by first contacts with email. This problem could underlie all the above: different genres require different degrees of efficiency; different groups develop different politeness conventions; and Gricean implicatures regularly break the criteria of efficiency – a metaphor may be socially effective, but is rarely efficient in the "minimax" way.

In view of these complicating factors, we find it necessary to ask what exactly might be meant by "communicative efficiency" in these cases, and whether such efficiency really does underlie the apparent rules for emails.

Efficiency and the breaking of rules

In terms of fairly basic economics, we might see efficiency as the degree of adherence to the minimax principle: minimum effort (on the part of senders, mediators and receivers) for maximum effect. Our problem is then to define the general desired "effect" of email language. This is difficult. In the e-learning environment the desired effect may be "community formation", "student satisfaction", "assimilation of content", "consensus on procedures", and much else besides. Those are questions we must ask in order to decide whether email is the most efficient means to attain our particular effects (as opposed to face-to-face classes, tutorials, or telephone conversations, for example). But they are not necessarily questions about the role of rules in emails.

At this point we will try to determine "effect" by looking at our suggested rules and seeing how and why they might be broken:

1. Use the subject line for a concise description of the topic.

This rule is clearly efficient if and when emails are being selected, stored, or arranged in accordance with threads. It is a rule adopted from the genre of business letters and memos; it concerns professional environments. As a form of efficiency, this is an area where email is virtually nonpareil. There are forms of communication, however, where effect is measured in other terms, and the rule is thus regularly broken. Spam emails are presumably only effective if the receiver is made to open them, and misleading, over-elaborate, impervious or misspelled subject lines are used quite effectively to attain this end. Again, in discussion lists we often find series of replies that repeat the same subject line (thus forming a thread) when the discussion has effectively wandered off to a neighbouring topic. This is not necessarily inefficient, since it indicates that people may want to follow that wandering thread, as they would a conversation or *tertulia*. It may be far less efficient to have a plethora of minor topics, all simply appearing without

visible connections. A third scenario would be the active “conversation” lists where the communication is close to chat exchanges, destined to disappear once received. If there is no value given to processes of selection, storage and retrieval, then the particular efficiency of subject lines is an irrelevant effect.

Observance of the rule is thus highly dependent on the type of email exchange involved. In the e-learning environment, storage and retrieval are important. We might thus ask if the breaking of this rule achieves any particular effect (implicature or otherwise), or if it is simply inefficient communication.

2. When replying to a message, automatically cite the previous message.

This rule is explicitly broken in Yahoo discussion lists, where users are instructed not to cite the whole of the previous message. This is because the emails become very long, taking up too much space, and thus incurring basic technical inefficiency. A better rule would be “just cite the passage of the previous message you are replying to”. Even then, the rule is regularly broken when the thread is clear from the subject line (technical efficiency says we need not repeat the same information twice). It is also broken in all those situations where email approaches conversational exchange, without call for storage and retrieval. In such situations, the use of non-citation may be not only more efficient, but part of a politeness convention, creating community through assumption of a shared context. If community formation is the goal, the rule may be broken in order to achieve efficiency.

3. Make sure you are replying to the intended person (i.e. “Reply to all” or “Reply to sender”).

This rule appears to be more like a question of competence rather than a conversational maxim. However, there are cases where it is broken regularly. When a student asks a question of a teacher, the message should ideally reach the whole group, even though only one addressee is mentioned. This makes the discussion list akin to the classroom situation, where much learning takes place by “over-hearing” question-and-answer between other students and the teacher (or indeed between other students). This is counter-intuitive at first; in fact it is a form of rule-breaking that has to be learned. The boundary between on-list and off-list communication is open to many manipulations, often to quite cunning effect.

4. Keep your message short.

This would seem to be the rule that is closest to a weak maxim for conversation. Criteria of length would appear to be highly genre-specific and group-specific. Yet they do exist, and an email can be felt to be excessively short or excessively long. In such cases, though, it is difficult to decide if the sender lacks competence or is creating implicatures. A too-short message may call for conversation; a too-long one may be designed to underscore an abundance of knowledge or points.

5. If you are addressing two distinct topics, use two emails.

As for topics, a common feature of most conversations is that one topic leads to another, creating forms of interweaving that positively require transitions within emails. We thus find structures such as “This reminds me of...”, “This is rather like...”, “Compare this

with...”, or even “While you are there...”. Topic-weaving may be considered an efficient form of community building, as opposed to the more bureaucratic efficiency of many discrete topics. Indeed, topic-weaving may create positive implicatures as a flouting of storage-and-retrieval efficiency (“this transition is just between you and me; no one will find it later...”).

Barthes: “le propre d’un thème, c’est d’être un peu vide” : A topic is always a little empty, a space to be filled and teased out, always leading to something else.

6. Use short sentences and short paragraphs.

One should expect this rule to be highly group-specific, genre-specific, and even dependent on wider cultural conventions. The English-language KISS principle (Keep it short and sweet) might correspond to the Italian KILC principle (Keep it long and complete). Katan gives a useful summary of what is at stake:

Many Anglo-American writers believe that good style is measured through clarity, brevity and simplicity, often known by its acronym KISS, keep it short and simple. However, many scholars (Blum-Kulka 1997: 41; Ochs 1977; Wierzbicka 1991: 69; Vincent-Marelli 1997: 99; Katan 1999a; Scollon & Scollon 2001: 111-116) maintain that what is considered ‘good’ communication style actually depends on the culture. Scollon & Scollon (2001: 106), for example, suggest that the Anglo-American values are embedded in what they call ‘the Utilitarian discourse system’, where “information should be conveyed as clearly, briefly, directly, and sincerely as possible”. On the other hand, Romance-language countries like Italy tend toward an indirect and implicit communication style in professional talk (see Victor 1992:143; Katan 1999: 181-183). This tendency is, we suggest, realized in Italian through a preference for a KILC communication style: Keep it Long and Complete (Katan 2000), with the result that professional talk in Italy is measured, in part, by length.

This aspect coincides with Lepschy & Lepschy’s analysis of Italian (quoted in Wierzbicka 1991: 265). They argue that ‘intensification’, or overstatement, has the function of “the identification of an authentic quality”. Without the extra length, there is less authenticity or authority. This intensification can be seen in the rendering of a simple ‘yes’ in English translated in our talkshow corpus as ‘verissimo’ (‘really true’) or ‘lei ha perfettamente ragione’ (‘you are absolutely correct’); or again, a ‘yes, yes’ has been turned into a longer ‘eh sì, è vero, ha ragione’ (‘oh yes, it is true, you are right’).

This latter observation comes from the analysis of Italian talk-shows on television. The real question here is whether the cultural preferences conform to the “norms” of email language (possibly making all emails a form of Anglo-American imperialism), or whether the emails themselves remain different in accordance with different cultural preferences. Despite Katan’s approach, we suspect that maxim and conventions may not be for entire languages or cultures. It is quite possible that the use of a new medium, in a new technological environment, brings about conformity to the apparent rules of the medium itself.

If the technology were all, email would have strong relative advantages for selection, storage and retrieval. Rules would thus be respected in order to increase

efficiency on those fronts. And the respect for those rules should be relatively culture-independent.

However, the “short as possible” rule is regularly broken. We often find the addition of apparently irrelevant information, in the form of asides, inserts, or personal comments just before the sign-off (e.g. “Raining here: hope the weather is better where you are”). Why add this information? We believe it is generally in order *personalize* the message, as a reaction against merely technical efficiency. This point will be picked up in a new hypothesis below.

7. Only use full caps (whole sentences written in capitals) if you are shouting.

This is a convention specific to the medium. It would appear to be part of competence in the generic sense. There is no Gricean maxim here. There are no instances of full caps in our corpus.

8. Use and understand smileys and the like.

Again, this is a convention specific to the medium. The use of these symbols is fairly limited in our corpus, and would appear to be more frequent among the more experienced users.

To summarize: There is a very clear difference between rules of the “competence” type (rules 3, 7, 8, and perhaps 1) and rules of the “maxim” type (the rest). The latter can be broken in order to achieve communicative effects. They must be understood in terms of a kind of efficiency that does not merely ensue from the relative advantages of the technology.

In view of the above, we are now in a position to formulate three related hypotheses that deserve further testing.

The personalization hypothesis

Let us include under the label of “personalization” all the things that are done to break the rules of “minimax” efficiency. This would include the adding of apparent irrelevant information, the mixing of topics, and the leaving of gaps in order to claim shared ground with the addressee. Personalization would be an important strategy for community building.

Our new hypothesis is that the relative advantages of email (selection, storage and retrieval) exploit relative asynchrony and move the communication away from the model of conversation. Email becomes a fact of *repetitive* communication: there are many messages, stored over time, and sent to many people. If it were not repetitive in this way, there would be little reason to insist on subject lines, brevity, or the organization in terms of topics. Personalization, however, breaks the repetitiveness, and thus aids in community formation.

Our argument should read as follows: *The efficiency of the “email rules” is for communication acts that are repetitive. Some communication acts are made to seem non-repetitive, and thus require personalization. Those acts tend to break the email rules.*

The argument might be of theoretical interest to the extent that non-repetitive acts include face-threatening acts (FTSs). A polite request is always made to appear

one-off, as is a polite refusal. This means that politeness conventions are to be associated with them in a general way.

Research on this hypothesis should carefully select a sub-corpus of very similar FTAs (e.g. requests and refusals) and compare their respect for the rules with that of the more general corpus.

One example: Following the tragic bombings in Madrid on March 11, 2004, messages of condolence were sent to our discussion lists by the students outside of Spain. According to the rules of email, the messages need only have said “bombings March 11: I’m sorry”. Such messages, however, require a high degree of personalization (the sentiment is supposed to be felt personally), and thus much more text. This personalization requirement is felt in all languages, although the one message sent in (L3) Spanish was longer than the ones sent in English.

It should be clear that “personalization” and “repetitiveness” are being used here as abstract values. There are many cases where personalization itself enters into repetitive chains. We find, for example, that one message of condolence triggers several others, or a penultimate observation on local weather conditions will be followed by several penultimate reflections on other weather conditions. It is by repeating personalization that community awareness is formed.

The convergence hypothesis

As our comments on the “short as possible” maxim should indicate, we are not sure whether email imposes its own norms, or whether it receives communication norms from the cultures involved. This could be checked in several ways:

1. One could select highly comparable corpora in two languages/cultures (say, one Yahoo group in Spanish, the other in English), extract similar FTAs, and compare the respect for the rules. One would expect significant differences with respect to length and topic weaving, for example.
2. One could study the emails sent by the same person in the two languages. There are some cases of this in our corpus. One would expect the emails to be very similar (i.e. the different languages do not impose different norms).
3. One could study emails as used to communicate between two cultural groups, regardless of the language. This is actually the situation we have. The situation is complicated by the fact that we are mixing L1 and L2 speakers of English, but we do have information on the different pragmatics involved.

Let us say that a study of type 1 reveals that Spanish emails are longer than English ones, by a difference of 10 (i.e. English = E, Spanish = E+10). What should we expect to find in a type-3 situation, where email is being used between Spanish and English cultural groups?

A study of cross-cultural conversations (in English) between Japanese and American students (White 1989) revealed significant convergence in the use of backchannels. That is, although the Japanese used backchannels much more than the Americans in intra-cultural communication, when the two cultures were made to interact the Japanese’s use went down, and the Americans’ went up. Applied to our example, we might thus expect that English-speakers would slightly increase the length of their emails (perhaps E+3) while Spanish speakers would decrease (perhaps to E+5).

What is interesting about the convergence hypothesis is that, if it is found to be true, we cannot then conclude that the email medium is imposing its norms. We would

also have to look for causation in the intercultural situation itself (since White found the same phenomenon in face-to-face communication).

The decreasing personalization hypothesis

Let us imagine we find significant personalization happening in emails. We believe that this personalization should help build a community. But what will happen over time? As people get to know each other, do they use more personalization, or less?

The “bulge hypothesis” formulated by Wolfson states that personalization (“facework”, in terms of classical pragmatics) occurs mostly in situations where participants are neither strangers nor good friends, but “potential friends”. We work a lot in order to get to know if a person might be our friend. Once we decide they cannot be our friend, our communication might return to a more professional mode, based on the efficiencies of repetition. And if they do become our friend, assumed intimacy means that less personalization has to be invested in the communication.

We might thus hypothesize that the features of personalization will tend to decrease over time. The participants will get to know each other, some friendships will be formed, other potential friendships will be abandoned. In effect, the learning community defined by the discussion list will break up into smaller groups. There should also be a progressive rise in off-list email exchanges.

The only thing missing in these three hypotheses is some data.

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