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Corporate emails as genre: investigating knowledge transfer in business email discourse

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how applied linguists may utilise methodological frameworks and theoretical constructs from other disciplines to analyse business email communication. In particular, it focuses on selected aspects of knowledge transfer via business emails studied with the help of genre analysis. As suggested by Bhatia, during the investigation of business emails from a generic perspective, the form and function of business emails is complemented by the description of the context in which that business email is produced and received.

Key words: applied linguistics, business, corporate communication, email, genre, knowledge transfer.

1. Introduction

Communicating via email has become an integral part of our everyday life. Nowadays most people use email to communicate with their family, friends and colleagues. In professional contexts, email has also become part and parcel of the everyday working environment, particularly within international settings. In fact, the use of email is on the rise. According to the "Quarterly email benchmark report Q4 2015 – July, August, September", email volume rose by 23.4 percent in Q3 2015 compared to Q4 2014 (p. 5). What is more, it is maintained that it is through email that significant information exchange takes place. This is especially true in a business context, in which it is said that email discourse is undertaken in order to transfer knowledge and thus conduct business activity. In this paper, I will explore, from a linguistic perspective, how knowledge is transferred via email in a business environment. To this end, I use a genre-based approach with the help of which I will investigate the generic structure of business email discourse and its linguistic realisation.

2. Background: generic perspective on research into business email communication

Parallel to the rise of business communication via email in the last decade, research concerning business email discourse has also grown in recent years. Researchers have dealt with various aspects of business email communication in terms of genre. As early as 2000, Mackenzie published results of a study concerning email classification within a business environment, specifically focusing on emails written by managers. She argued that "[e]-mail is transforming from a message and contact tool, similar to the telephone, to an accepted medium for recorded knowledge. This recorded knowledge needs to be classified for future access or discarded (or else it will simply linger)" (Mackenzie 2005: 407). Kankaanranta (2005) also dealt with email classification. She investigated Swedish-Finnish business email discourse and offered a classification of email genres in a corporate context dependant on email communicative function. By investigating the generic structure of business emails in the form of specific moves (Swales 1990); (Bhatia 1993); Kankaanranta distinguished three types of email, i.e. Dialogue messages (information exchange), Noticeboard messages (information delivery), and Postman messages (with a delivery function, i.e. sending attachments). Akin to this, Gimenez (2006) published his paper on the embeddedness of business emails, in which he underlined that email messages exchanged within one communicative event "are dependent on another or others to make complete communicative sense" (Gimenez 2006: 155). In other words, he urged for the analysis of business emails within the constraints of email chains. Carrió-Pastor and Muñiz-Calderón (2013) investigated the generic structure of business emails in order to detect variations in the internal organisation of emails composed by Asian emailers. De Felice and Deane (2012) and De Felice et al. (2013) studied speech acts in business emails, and proposed a classification of these. There have also been attempts to discover more about the lexico-grammatical features of business emails. Jensen (2009) searched for discourse strategies in professional email negotiation, with a special focus on metadiscourse (hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, engagement markers), whereas Yue and Wang (2014) dealt specifically with hedges categorisation and distribution in business email writing. Kleinberger Günther (2002) researched politeness in corporate email communication. Functions of recurring syntactic features have also been explored in business emails (Gimenez 2000). Moreover, researchers have dealt with the hybridity of business email genre (Gillaerts 2012); (Kleinberger Günther 2005). Thus it can be concluded that business email as a genre has been analysed linguistically on the three levels outlined by Bhatia (1993), i.e. (1) analysis of lexico-grammatical features, (2) analysis of text-patterning, and (3) structural interpretation of the text-genre. Additionally, studies have been undertaken by Alnajjar (2016) and Zając (2013)

to investigate business emails from a generic perspective within context, as Bhatia (2014) advocates. It is worth adding that researchers have studied business email communication in both international and national contexts, i.e. in a specific *lingua franca*, prominently English (also referred to as English as a Business *lingua franca*, BELF, see Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013: 17); (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, and Kankaanranta 2005: 403–404), and the given mother tongue of emailers, respectively.

3. Business email from a genre-based approach

Based upon the overview of literature concerning research into business email communication in terms of genre provided in Section 2, it may be noted that the recent conceptualisation of genre goes beyond a straightforward connection between the communicative purpose of a text and its form. Indeed, sociocultural (external) context and participants' knowledge (internal context) are incorporated in the analysis (Schnurr 2013: 35). Email, as viewed as one of the genres of professional communication, has also been analysed taking into account external and internal contexts. Let us now characterise emails in more detail in Sections 3.1–3.3.

3.1. Email characteristics – form

Basically, an email should be viewed as a text (Alnajjar 2016: 212–213); (Zając 2013: 135) consisting of two parts: structural and thematic (see Figure 1). On the basis of the structural part, also called the "header" (Beutner 2002: 21), basic information about the email and its intention may be deduced. In more detail, it may be figured out who ("From:") sent the email, when ("Sent:") and to whom ("To:"), who was included in the carbon copy of the

From: Surname, Name (1)
Sent: 23 November 2014 13:18
To: Surname, Name (2)
Cc: Surname, Name (3); Surname, Name (4)
Subject: RE: RE: Project name
Importance: High

CONTAINER
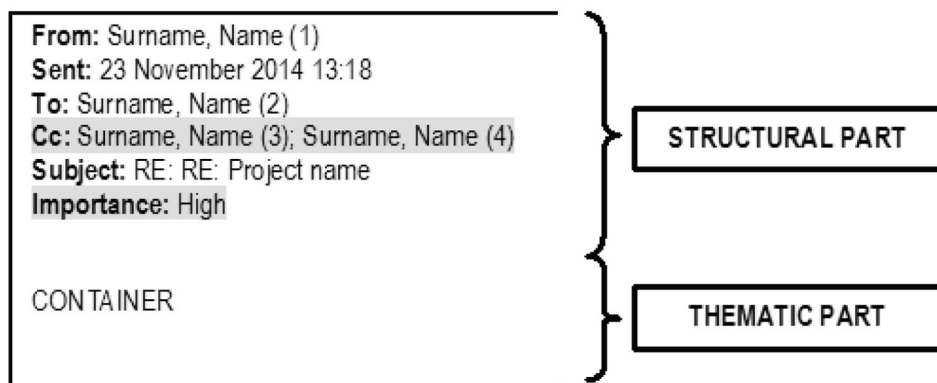
STRUCTURAL PART

THEMATIC PART

Figure 1: Parts of email (lines highlighted in grey are optional; see Alnajjar 2016: 213)

message ("Cc:"), what topic was discussed ("Subject:"), and how important the email was ("Importance:"). The thematic part, on the other hand, takes the form of the actual text in which business emailers may express their knowledge. Therefore, this part may be called the "body" (Beutner 2002: 21) or the "container". It is worth noting that some researchers differentiate between the body and the signature of emails, in particular when the signature is set automatically where the actual text finishes (Beutner 2002: 21–25).

Let us focus on the form of the container (body), i.e. the actual written text utilised for knowledge management purposes in a business context (Alnajjar 2016: 212–224). The container has a specific superstructure, macrostructure, and microstructure. The superstructure (prefabricated structure) is the so-called "generalised genre structure" (Berzlánovich, Egg, and Redeker 2012: 140), which enables emailers to present the email's content. It is a schematic structure of a text, and thus a formal structure or global form composed of conventionalised schemes for the macrostructural content of the text (van Dijk 1980); (Renkema 2004: 97). In other words, whereas (schematic) superstructure deals with the global form of the text, (semantic) macrostructure refers to the content, i.e. global meaning of this text (van Dijk 1980: 108–109). Macrostructures are formed using three macrorules, i.e. deletion, generalisation, and construction (van Dijk 1980: 153); (Renkema 2004: 94–96). More specifically, when understanding (interpreting, reconstructing) propositions within email content, emailers may eliminate certain propositions (deletion), convert them into a more general proposition (generalisation), or construct them into one proposition (construction). The relationship between propositions can be referred to as a (semantic) "microstructure". When analysing emails from a generic perspective, these features of an email, understood as text should be supplemented with the understanding of email function (see Section 3.2) and the context in which the emails are composed (see Section 3.3).

3.2. Business email function

From a genre-based approach, business email form goes in tandem with its function. It is widely agreed that business email is utilised in order to "perform" (Gilbert 2012). Practitioners view their communication in general as a means to "get the job done". This also applies to business communication. In academic discourse such goals of professional communication are referred to as "transactional" (Koester 2006: 26); (Schnurr 2013: 9–12). However, both Schnurr and Koester aptly point out that apart from "getting the job done", when they communicate, professionals also build relationships with one another. This is considered of great importance when conducting business. Therefore, Schnurr and Koester distinguish between transactional and relational aspects of professional communication in order to build a full picture of communication in professional contexts, even though "in many workplace interactions

transactional goals seem to be participants' main concern" (Schnurr 2013: 9). Transactional and relational goals are also realised with the help of emails. It is near impossible to reach communicative goals via email without building relationships with other business emailers. It is worth adding that in order to reach their goals at work, professionals transfer knowledge. Being part of knowledge management (Liebert 2003: 88), knowledge transfer is a linguistic process that incorporates both transactional and relational aspects. In other words, knowledge transfer can be observed on the basis of texts, as can the instrumental and relational/social purposes of business interactants (Koester 2010: 97). Email can be viewed as one type of text that is used in order to pursue knowledge transfer, in addition to further transactional and relational goals.

3.3. Context of business email discourse

Professional communication in general, and business email communication in particular, should be analysed and interpreted in context in order that the transactional and relational purposes followed during the process of knowledge exchange and knowledge transfer itself can be better understood. Within the constraints of anthropocentric linguistics (see Grucza 2010), we distinguish between internal context and external context. Whereas the internal context refers to the idiocontext of interactants that in turn subsumes their knowledge about the world, about the communication partners, and their specialist idio-knowledge, the external context relates to the situation in which interactants communicate, i.e. the broad social, cultural, and professional context. With regard to business email discourse, this means that internal context refers to the specific knowledge and experience of an individual specialist emailer, while with the help of external context, specific features of a given business entity are described. It should be borne in mind that as regards business settings, there are no identical internal and external contexts. In other words, the analysis of texts and discourses produced within a particular business entity should be proceeded by a description of the context in which this business entity operates.

4. Knowledge transfer via business email discourse

In this paper describing knowledge transfer via business email discourse, I focus on a specific type of business email produced and received within a business setting, i.e. what Kankaanranta refers to as "Dialogue messages"[1] whose communicative aim is to exchange information. This type of email

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[1] AlAfnan (2015: 5–6) uses the expression "Discussion messages", although he deals with email communication at universities.

usually constitutes the majority of emails exchanged in a corporate setting (Kankaanranta 2005: 220). Dialogue messages consist of framing and content moves, whereas it is content moves that are utilised for the purposes of knowledge transfer and transactional purposes. Framing moves, on the other hand, are mainly helpful in building relationships with other business discourse participants, but they are also used for communicative purposes (in particular email subject). Examples 1–5 show various types of moves of business Dialogue messages utilised for the purposes of knowledge transfer. It is worth adding that the email in Example 1 is the so-called "chain initiator" (see Gimenez 2006: 160), i.e. it starts an email discourse, whereas emails in Examples 2–5 are embedded emails. These emails are produced between the chain initiator and the chain terminator. The chain terminator finishes the given email discourse (communicative event). In this paper, I do not discuss chain terminators further.

Let us have a look at the moves within a chain initiator from a selected email discourse. This stems from a corpus of emails exchanged in the project management context by a team of international specialists aiming to develop a specific software. The team members communicate in English as a Business *lingua franca* (see Section 2).

Example 1[2]: Moves in Dialogue messages: chain initiator

From: P[3]1 **Sent**: Tuesday, September xx, 2015 11:13 AM **To**: P2; P3 **Cc**: P4; P5; P6; P7; P8; P9; P10 **Subject**: Task name: X versus Y	Move I: Identifying email participants, date & subject
Hi P2 & P3,	Move II: Salutation and addressing
I just want to point out that a simple […] is not a solution to […].	Move III: Providing introductory information
What happens in case of […]: 1. If the […] this will be detected by […] and […] will be re-started. 2. But if the […] crashes […] gets broken and […] is not able […]. 3. […] will detect that […], classifies this as […] and […]. 4. All […] will throw error response, all […] are turned off.	Move IV: Providing main information
In short: […] crash = no […] till […].	Move V: Pre-closing
Best regards	Move VI: Closing
P1	Move VII: Signature

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[2]   All provided emails have been masked.
[3]   P stands for "Participant".

Following Example 1, it may be observed that Moves I (Identifying email participants, date & subject), II (Salutation and addressing), VI (Closing), and VII (Signature) are framing moves, as they mainly contribute to the physical layout of the business email. Moves III (Providing introductory information), IV (Providing main information), and V (Pre-closing) may be referred to as content moves as they contribute to the key communicative purpose (transactional aim) of the email in question. The transactional aim of this email is to find a solution to an existing problem (Move III). Even though the author of the email does not formulate a question or an explicit request, it is clear in this particular business context that he or she is asking other emailers for help. As mentioned previously, the email comes from a project management setting, in which it is essential to reach a certain result within a specific, usually tight deadline, to a fixed budget. Therefore, it can be easily deduced that it is not the aim of the email author to inform other emailers about the lack of a solution. Rather it is to ask them to find one. This means that Moves III, IV, and V can be viewed as a request. In these three moves, the author of the email provides detailed information (transfers knowledge) about what does not work so that other emailers can help to find a solution. In Move V he or she gives a summary of the issue, which he or she highlights in bold. De Felice et al. (2013: 92) mention that in a business context "the illocutionary effect of a request comes not from a single sentence but from the entire sequence of utterances". Indeed, requesting should be viewed in the category of a speech event, rather than a single speech act (Yule 1996: 57).

Further embedded business emails exchanged within an email chain following such a chain initiator incorporate further speech acts and events relating to informing and requesting. Let us have a look at further email exchange in the embedded email 1 (Example 2):

Example 2: Moves in Dialogue messages: embedded email 1

From: P4 **Sent**: Friday, September xx, 2015 11:53 AM **To**: P1 **Cc**: P2; P3; P5; P6; P7; P8; P9; P10, P11 **Subject**: RE: Task name: X versus Y	Move I: Identifying email participants, date & subject
Hi P1,	Move II: Salutation and addressing
We discussed this topic […].	Move III: Providing introductory information
Based on discussions and agreements done so far for […] we think that this […] is according to what we planned together. Now we have to think if we plan to change […] planned […] and if we need it for […].	Move IV: Providing main information

First step to do [...] mentioned by you would be definition of [...] – when we have it we can go to implementation, but [...].	
Please let me know when can we discuss definition of [...].	Move V: Pre-closing
BR	Move VI: Closing
P4	Move VII: Signature

In the embedded email 1 (Example 2), the author (P4) responds to the chain initiator (Example 1), by providing some necessary information to the request by the author of the chain initiator (Moves III and IV). However, P4 is not able to provide a final solution due to a lack of information. Therefore, he or she finishes the embedded email 1 with a request found almost at the end of the email in Move V (*Please let me know when can we discuss definition of [...]*) in order to obtain the further information required to suggest a solution. An implicit request may also be observed in Move IV (*Now we have to think if we plan to change [...] planned [...] and if we need it for [...]*). Because no answer is provided for a number of days by P1, P4 repeats the request in the next email (embedded email 2, see Example 3). This time, the request comes earlier, i.e. in Move III in the form of a Yes-no question (*Is it possible to work on [...] in current week?*), and is repeated implicitly in Move IV (*We need to define [...] with you.*). In general, the content of the embedded email 2 is much shorter.

Example 3: Moves in Dialogue messages: embedded email 2

From: P4 **Sent**: Monday, October xx, 2015 10:16 AM **To**: P1 **Cc**: P2; P3; P5; P6; P7; P8; P9; P10, P11 **Subject**: RE: Task name: X versus Y	Move I: Identifying email participants, date & subject
Hello P1,	Move II: Salutation and addressing
Is it possible to work on [...] in current week?	Move III: Requesting
We need to define [...] with you.	Move IV: Pre-closing
BR	Move V: Closing
P4	Move VI: Signature

An answer to the embedded email 2 is provided within two hours (embedded email 3, see Example 4). The author of the email (P1) gives certain information asked by P4 in the embedded emails 1 (Moves IV and V) and 2 (Moves III and IV). It is worth pointing out that the manner of providing information creates the impression that P1 is already irritated, as he or she uses several negative forms, such as *I do not see a need, we will not change*

(Move III), *will be no acceptable solution at all* (Move IV). Also the phrase *This is known since months* (Move V) indicates that P1 is frustrated with the exchange with P4. P1 also provides a further, though again implicit, request in Move V (*for sure we need a solution for [...]*). It is worth noting that this request is more specific than the one in the chain initiator (see Example 1).

Example 4: Moves in Dialogue messages: embedded email 3

From: P1 **Sent**: Monday, October xx, 2015 12:53 AM **To**: P4 **Cc**: P2; P3; P5; P6; P7; P8; P9; P10, P11, P12 **Subject**: RE: Task name: X versus Y	Move I: Identifying email participants, date & subject
Hi P4,	Move II: Salutation and addressing
I do not see a need for defining any [...]. We will not change [...], it works as it should. I just want to inform you about the [...] in case it gets into trouble.	Move III: Providing introductory information
[...] is only an issue of [...]. In my opinion a simple [...] will be no acceptable solution at all.	Move IV: Providing main information
This is known since months and for sure we need a solution for [...].	Move V: Pre-closing
BR	Move VI: Closing
P1	Move VII: Signature

However, in order to answer this request, P4 again needs further information that he or she formulates a request for in the Pre-closing of the next embedded email (embedded email 4, see Example 5), after providing information related to the topic at hand. Again, this request is more specific than those in the embedded emails 1 or 2 (see Example 2 and 3, respectively). Interestingly, P4 indirectly refers to the irritated tone of the embedded email 3, by explaining in Move III that the changes introduced to the scope of the project require modifications to project arrangements: *assumption was to [...] – now we have situation that [...]. This is new [...] to what we discussed some weeks ago* (highlighted by J. A.). This is an indicator that his or her request should/must be answered, which is explicitly stated in Move IV: *but I need information from you...simply to keep our [...] stable and working.*

Example 5: Moves in Dialogue messages: embedded email 4

From: P4 **Sent**: Monday, October xx, 2015 13:53 AM **To**: P1 **Cc**: P2; P3; P5; P6; P7; P8; P9; P10, P11, P12 **Subject**: RE: Task name: X versus Y	Move I: Identifying email participants, date & subject

Hi P1,	Move II: Salutation and addressing
As we talked with team – assumption was to [...] – now we have situation that [...]. This is new [...] to what we discussed some weeks ago.	Move III: Providing main information
We will do changes [...] but I need information from you if it is the only [...] which you see or you expect another [...] – simply to keep our [...] stable and working.	Move IV: Pre-closing
BR	Move VI: Closing
P4	Move VII: Signature

The discussion between the emailers continued. Over time, as the complexity of the topic grew, further emailers were included in it or the passive emailers became active (Gimenez 2006: 161–162)[4]. This can be partially observed in the examples quoted in the line "Cc:" in Move I. Due to space limitations, I do not quote further email messages. The examples already provided point towards the conclusion that business email participants transfer knowledge and follow their transactional goals by providing information and requesting information, action, etc. It may be stated that requesting and providing information constitute two key moves in business email discourse (see also Alnajjar 2016).

5. Discussion

The notion of genre is helpful in investigating knowledge transfer in business email discourse. By observing the form and structure of business emails, their function may be better analysed. However, as mentioned previously, genre analysis of business emails should be complemented with the analysis of the context in which business emails are exchanged. In this paper, I only briefly mention the project management context and skim over project requirements, without describing in detail the settings of the business entity and the case study, from which the examples of emails originate. This is because the case study in question is covered by a non-disclosure agreement, according to which I am not permitted to reveal any data. Despite this, I would like to underline that it is of paramount importance to analyse the context when investigating business email discourse in terms of genre. Without taking into account the context, I would not have been able to understand power asym-

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4   Gimenez (2006: 161–162) differentiates between active and passive emailers. Whereas active email participants contribute to the production of messages (they are either email composers or persons responding to emails), passive email participants witness email discourse, i.e. their email addresses are usually given in the "Cc:" line.

metries between email participants, which in turn was helpful in deciding in which situations providing information should be interpreted as requesting (see Example 1). Again, I do not discuss here the given power asymmetries due to the non-disclosure agreement.

As I mentioned in Section 3.2, business emailers pursue both transactional and relational goals. Based on the analysis of moves in Dialogue messages, it can be stated that the content moves, i.e. the moves concerning requesting and providing information are helpful in reaching transactional goals, whereas the framing moves, in particular greetings and closings, are useful for building relationships with other participants of the email discourse (see Mirivel 2014: 30; Waldvogel 2007). Nonetheless, also within the content moves, elements of the so-called "positive" and "negative" communication aimed at building relationships can be seen, which I mentioned with regard to Example 4 (embedded email 3). In this paper, however, I do not dwell on this, as this would require extensive analysis of email microstructure, requiring more space than I have.

Furthermore, it would be valuable to differentiate the steps within the moves of providing information and requesting in order to investigate in more detail how these speech acts/events are formulated. To this end, it may be useful to devise a classification of speech acts in business emails and then annotate specific business emails (see Alnajjar 2016).

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that knowledge transfer is the key communicative function of business email discourse, as it allows more global, ultimate transactional goals to be reached. What is more, in a business setting, in which email is increasingly the most common type of text, knowledge is transferred particularly through the moves of providing information and requesting that can be differentiated in business emails. These two moves allow various details, necessary to reach business goals, to be clarified step by step. Thus, they should be further analysed from a linguistic perspective, due to the fact that knowledge transfer is a linguistic process, and as such can be optimised in the future with the help of linguists. In particular, the microstructure of email texts should be investigated in more detail, as it allows for a better understanding of those relational aspects of communication that are inextricably connected with the instrumental ones.

6. Conclusion

All in all, this paper presents the position that business email is an important type of text utilised in business settings for the purpose of knowledge transfer, in which transactional and relational goals are pursued, and therefore business emails should be further researched so that business email discourse can be optimised and become more efficient. As this paper showcases, genre analysis is a useful tool for investigating business email. Nevertheless, email

is not the only type of text employed in a business setting and by no means is email alone enough to successfully meet all the goals of professional communication. In addition, "genres of professional communication are constantly changing and new genres are emerging – partly as a consequence of changes in the professional landscape and technological advances" (Schnurr 2013: 178). Therefore, other business genres should also be the object of linguistic inquiry with the help of a genre-based approach.

In more general terms, it can be concluded that this paper confirms the thesis presented by Bargiela-Chappini et al. (2007: 5) and reiterated by Schnurr (2013: 22–23), according to which applied linguistics should not be perceived as a discipline solely dealing with issues of pedagogical nature, relating to language use and acquisition, but also as a field in which professional communication is investigated so that its quality may be improved. Professional communication, exemplified here by business email communication, requires applied linguists to take a multidisciplinary perspective. In other words, it is applied linguists who should study professional communication, nevertheless it is crucial that they include in their studies theoretical constructs and analytical frameworks stemming from other disciplines (Alnajjar 2016). Only in such a way can linguistic findings be of both theoretical and practical relevance to a wider audience (Schnurr 2013: 22). This paper presents that in order to capture the complexity of business email communication, an applied linguist should become acquainted with the specific business area, in order to better understand the external context in which given specialists conduct email communication. Additionally, for the purposes of conducting analysis, the genre-based approach is of great use. Thus, applied linguistics becomes a discipline in dialogue with other fields of study. As such, applied linguistics and applied linguists, in particular the ones studying professional communication, can build bridges between various disciplines.

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