Standard versus Non Standard: An Analysis of language used for Formal Business Communication through E-mails.

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Abstract

Internet language is currently recognized as a new language variety for its neologisms, novel syntax, for its rapid growth and many more reasons. It is also feared and viewed by many for its lax standards and impact on particular languages and language in general. This research attempted to observe whether these varied uses and standards of internet language have affected formal business communication carried out through e-mails by analyzing the discourse of 174 actual emails used for formal communication in different sectors such as government, private, and non-government against language standards of formal letters.

Key words: formal business communication, e-mails, internet language.

Introduction

The twenty first century is aptly called the age of communications technology because it has not only affected the mode of communication but has also changed many aspects of human life while exercising a powerful influence and dominance over it. This research attempts to critically evaluate the impact of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) on formal business communication by analyzing the language used in e-business communication through e-mails in different business sectors in Sri Lanka. Thus the research will analyze the changes in language used in formal business communication by comparing actual emails used for business communication with language standards of traditional or conventional formal letters. It also makes an effort to clarify and define the changes found in the data by questioning (through an instrument of a questionnaire) the writers of these emails on the process of writing a business email and their attitude to language usage of formal business communication and to identify the nature of change and a possible rationale for this change.

The Research Objective

Internet language is evolving as a distinct language variety. Its effect on certain languages and on language in general needs an in-depth analysis. However the internet and internet language is often regarded as a threat on language, particularly as a threat on language standards, among other threats and fears.

It is this issue on standards which drives this research. Thus the objective of this research is to analyze language used in e-mails for formal business communication in Sri Lanka in different business sectors as the government, private and non government, in comparison with the language of conventional business letters, to observe whether the e-mails adhere to the age old traditions of formal business communication or whether they have deviated from the norm. It is expected that the findings of this research would widen the understanding of the impact of ICT on formal business communication which in turn could be utilized in updating the traditions of formal business communication with regard to emails in teaching Business English as a subject in our country.

Literature Review

It must be emphasized that literature directly related to the studies on e-mails used for formal business communication in Sri Lanka was extremely difficult to find.

As Halliday argues, technology has the effect of diminishing 'the gap between spoken and written text' (Halliday, 1996 p 335), which could be suggestive of the fact that the distinctions of a written variety of language, the rules pertaining to the written forms of language are eventually disappearing, especially when language is used in the internet and it other modes of modern communication. Omission of functional words in text messages and also in emails could be given as one example.

Ex. Team meeting tomorrow.

Halliday does not discuss what aspect/s prompt this change in language usage when associated with technology, particularly the internet.

On the other hand the above mentioned 'development' in language usage in the internet is seen as a threat on language in general (the fear experienced here is whether the relaxed rules of syntax, spelling, pronunciation, punctuation and the like extant in certain sectors of the internet such as the chat rooms, emails, and social networks, would make language lose its homogeneity?) and on individual languages in particular by many. (Will the languages only spoken by small speech communities which are not used in the web survive this computer age or be obliterated by the dominant language of the web?) David Crystal, who calls the internet a 'linguistic revolution' (Crystal D, 2000) referring to some negative comments made on the internet in newspapers, in his book Language and the Internet, says; The authors are always ready to acknowledge the immense technological achievement, communicative power, and social potential of the Internet; but within a few lines their tone changes, as they express their concerns. It is a distinctive genre of worry. But unlike sociologists, political commentators, economists, and others who draw attention to the dangers of the Internet with

respect to such matters as pornography, intellectual property rights, privacy, security, libel and crime, these authors are worried primarily about linguistic issues. For them, it is language in general and individual languages in particular, which are going to end up as Internet casualties, and their specific questions raise a profusion of specters. Do the relaxed standards of e-mails augur the end of literacy and spelling as we know it? Will the Internet herald a new era of technobabble? Will linguistic creativity and flexibility be lost as globalization imposes sameness?

Crystal's concern whether the relaxed standards of language would bring about 'end of literacy and spelling' is significant. He goes a step further than Halliday in predicting that technology, particularly communications technology would diminish rules and conventions pertaining to writing.

In the work cited above both researchers clearly agree that the impact of ICT on language is inevitable. But none of the works identify the reasons for the effect of technology on language. They only observe that the effect of ICT on language usage has resulted in erasing the distinction between the written and the spoken variety.

The effect of the internet on language is evidently inevitable and this may be due to its wide spread and common usage. It is observably evident that formal business communication carried out through formal letters and the same communication carried out through emails is different in many ways. This study attempted to grasp those changes taking place in the Sri Lankan context in its attempt to see what reasons may have caused these changes.

Methodology

This research employs discourse analysis as a research method in comparing a corpus of authentic emails used for business communication in three different sectors, namely the government sector, the private sector and the non-government sector, of the business world in Sri Lanka against the language of formal letters derived from a descriptive a book on Business English to see whether

the standards pertaining to language of formal business letters adhered to or deviated from, in formal business communication carried out through emails. The three sectors mentioned above were selected based on a pilot study carried out (using a questionnaire as an instrument of data collection) to find out to which extent these different sectors which compose the business world use emails for their formal business communication. The pilot study concluded that all the three sectors use emails for formal business communication on a regular basis.

174 authentic emails used for formal business communication were collected from these sectors and the discourse was analyzed in comparison to the elements of a formal business letter as there is no set format or a template exclusively designed for a formal business email yet. Set language standards and conventions regarding each element of a business letter derived from a descriptive technical writing book, namely *Technical writing* by Gerson and Gerson 2007 was compared in analyzing the discourse of formal business emails.

''Methodology" is a broader a term than it connotes. In this research, it is conceived as the term to refer to the critical evaluation of investigative activity carried out through discourse analysis in relation to the variables developed.

The sample

The sample represents three major areas of business in Sri Lanka. As mentioned earlier these three sections were selected based on a pilot survey to find out whether emails are used for formal communication. Thus data, namely 174 emails were collected from the following sectors from January to March 2008.

1. The Private sector

2. The Government sector

3. The Non Government Organizations.

Total Number of e-mails	From the Government Sector	From the Private Sector	From NGOs
174	36	100	38
As a Percentage of the Total	20.69%	57.47%	21.84%

Table 01

Data of this research can be considered very authentic as they are actual e-mails used; both sent and received by the different organizations belonging to the different sectors mentioned above.

The writers of these emails both senders and receivers belong to different positions in their organizations such as clerks, accountants, office mangers, directors, human resources trainers and the like. Majority of them are bilinguals of Sinhala and English and a few Tamil and English bilinguals. All of them have been in their current positions for more than 3 years.

The Variables

The variables of this analysis are a set of features or elements developed as aforesaid through a close study and an association of the language standards of traditional and conventional formal letters. There are many language standards in traditional formal letter writing with regard to all the parts of a formal letter. Such as addresses (sender's and receiver's), date, salutation, topic or the subject line, body of the letter (which would include the opening sentence, paragraphs containing the body of the letter and the concluding paragraph with concluding remarks), the complimentary line and the signature. There are also many language conventions and ethos with regard to formal letters such as the need to be courteous, correct, concise and cohesive in expression. But for this research, since the aim is to analyze language used for formal communication in emails, only the following features are selected as variables to make this research feasible.

There are four variables set for this research and all the four are derived from the descriptive book on technical writing by Sharon J Gerson and Steven M. Gerson named Technical Writing. These language standards are prescribed as common standards for formal business writing for the world of business and are not limited to any country.

1. Subject line
2. Abbreviations
3. Conversational terms
4. Salutation and complimentary close

1. Subject line

Sharon J Gerson and Steven M. Gerson in their book *Technical Writing* lay down the following rule regarding the subject line for formal letter writing. That is, a subject line should not be of one word and it should contain at least two words containing a topic word along with a focus word. Thus subject line must be informative and must carry the gist of the letter.

Subject line of an email is an optional element, which has to be inserted manually, but the software always queries its absence and it is considered efficient practice to include it, especially in formal e-mails.

2. Abbreviations

There are only a strict number of abbreviations conventionally used in formal communications according to Sharon J Gerson and Steven M. Gerson's book *Technical Writing*. Such as the following

Asap = as soon as possible

Cc = carbon copy (when a letter is copied to receivers other than the one mentioned in the receiver's address, this abbreviation is used.)

enc. = enclosure (to indicate attachments)

NB = Note well (Latin - nota bene)

pp = per procurationem (A Latin phrase meaning the letter is signed by a different person on behalf of the relevant signatory)

ps = postscript (to indicate the inclusion of additional information)

pto = please turn over

RSVP = please reply

As derived from the book of Technical writing by Sharon J Gerson and Steven M. Gerson apart from the above abbreviations, the conventional formal letter very strongly discourages the use of abbreviations in formal letter, considering it impolite and ill-mannered.

3. Conversational terms.

Sharon J Gerson and Steven M. Gerson mention that experts of traditional or conventional formal letter writing have always been thoroughly in opposition to the use of any conversational forms in business communication. Colloquial phrases are considered very informal and inappropriate to be included in formal written business communication. The dictionary meaning for conversational style is as follows: (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English)

1. Conversational: a conversational style, phrase etc. is informal and commonly used in conversation. Ex: Business letters are not usually written in conversational style.

2. Conversational: Concerning or relating to conversation.
Thus data was analyzed to see whether the emails have used any conversational terms.

4. Salutation and complimentary close

Rules of formal letters regarding salutation and complimentary close have always been very rigid and well established according to Sharon J Gerson and Steven M. Gerson. Thus there are strict rules and specifications as to the use of salutation and the complimentary close that should be used in relevance to the salutation.

They are as follows

When the recipient's name is unknown:

Dear Sir ... Yours faithfully

Dear Madam ... Yours faithfully

Dear Sir or Madam ... Yours faithfully

When the recipient's name is known to the writer:

Dear Mr Hanson ... Yours sincerely

Dear Mrs Hanson ... Yours sincerely

Dear Miss Hanson ... Yours sincerely

Dear Ms Hanson ... Yours sincerely

When addressing a good friend or a colleague:

Dear Jack ... Best wishes/Best regards

Addressing whole departments:

Dear Sirs ... Yours faithfully

Discourse of the data was analyzed in comparison to the above variables to adjudge whether they have confirmed to this universally accepted norm that Sharon J Gerson and Steven M. Gerson have outlined in their book or deviated from that norm.

Data Analysis and Conclusions

In order to analyze to what extent conventional language standards of formal letters have changed when the mode of communication is emails but not formal letters, actual e-mails used for business communication were collected as data in this research.

The sample consisted of 174 emails collected from different sectors such as the government sector, the private sector and the NGOs.
The analysis is as follows with regard to the four variables:

1. Subject Line

The following table (Table 02) shows the comparative data analysis with regard to the subject line. It shows instances of subject lines which can be considered as instances of deviations from the formal letter writing standards as a percentage of the sample.

The accepted norm as outlined by Sharon J Gerson and Steven M. Gerson in their book Technical Writing regarding the subject line of formal business letter was explained in the 'variables' section stating that a subject line should not be of one word and it should contain at least two words containing a topic word along with a focus word. Thus subject line must be informative and must carry the gist of the letter.

Total number of emails	From the Government Sector	From the Private Sector	From NGOs
174	36	100	38
Deviated subject lines 63.81%	02 (5.5%)	32 (32%)	10 (26.31%)

Table 02

The result regarding the subject line of a formal e-mail is that 63.81% of all the e-mails had an informal subject line which have disregarded the above mentioned language standard. Some subject lines were of one word such as audit, meeting and outing and most of the subject lines (of the 63.81%) were not informative and did not have a topic word along with a focus word. Some examples would be *next meeting, to the sales staff,* and training program . Thus we can arrive at the conclusion that e-mails used for formal communication have disregarded the language standards of traditional and conventional formal letter writing in relation to subject line.

Language of a subject line is very important because it is read before the content of the email along with the sender's name. The inbox only has a limited space for the display of the subject line. Thus the e-mail manuals emphasize on using the most important piece of information appearing at the beginning of the line.

The subject line of a message also assists the reader in deciding which mail to read first or whether to read the mail at all or not. Thus it functions as a filtering tool which emphasizes the need to make subject lines, specific, brief and informative.

In contrast to these language standards mentioned above, there were many e-mails, used for formal business communication with one lines as a forementioned and also subject lines carrying only the name of the program or the event it is referred to. Such as '*Design Documents'* and '*Cooperate Soft Skills Program'*.

Use of one word, non informative subject lines in the data may be suggestive of the swiftness associated with the process of writing an e-mail. As for our experience we are aware that emails are generally written without much planning, editing and sent without re-reading. It must also be noted that non informative subject lines would make sorting or organizing emails for recording or any other purposes complicated and time consuming when there are many mails with the same subject line.

2. Abbreviation

As explained earlier, except for the few number of abbreviations which were mentioned as the accepted abbreviations of formal business communication, any other abbreviation found in data was taken into consideration in analysis as a deviation from the language standards of formal letters. Abbreviations such as rgds (regards) mgt (management) nos (numbers) tks, (Thanks) pl (please), tc (Take care), specs (specifications) were considered deviant from the suggested norm.

It was observed that most of the abbreviations found in data are not generally used in traditional formal letters. The following table (Table 03) is an analysis of average abbreviations found in a mail in different sectors.

Sector	Number of abbreviations in a mail (average)
Government Sector	01
Private Sector	03
NGOs	02

Table 03

According to the table above (Table 03) it was clear that it was the private sector which used most number of abbreviations in their mails. It must also be noted that most of the mails were internal mails and the degree of formality was far more less in them than in external mails.

One of the significant and obvious features of Internet language is the lexicon that belongs to the internet. According to Prof. David Crystal the internet is one of the most creative lexical domains in contemporary English, involving all major lexical processes (Crystal, D 2001, 82). Various types of abbreviations found in Internet language have been one of its most remarkable features as a distinct language variety.

Depending on the new found fact that the private sector uses at least three abbreviations in a mail, the most obvious and evident conclusion we can arrive at is that the traditional and conventional standards on the use of abbreviations in formal letter writing are being disregarded and overlooked.

3. Conversational terms

The terms identified as conversational terms are the colloquial ones not normally found in a traditional formal letter. Language standards of formal business letters discourage any use of conversational terms. Some conversational terms found in data are;

1. Dear guys (Salutation)

2. HAPPY SALES (complimentary line , all in capitals)

3. Pat, (Short name or nick name for salutation)

Pl. note (Whole body of the e-mail)

Done (Whole body of the e-mail)

4. Hope you'll keep in out for the time being (Formal request)

5. Shall drop it off at your office (referring to a document)

6. Dear Pat, (Short name or nick name for salutation)

Have noted (Whole body of the e-mail)

7. Dear Anne,

Hi, hope you are doing well! (Opening line of the e-mail)

8. I gave a quotation (opening line of the e-mail)

9. Correct me if I'm wrong (Last line of the mail before the complimentary line)

10. Ok go ahead (giving approval, the whole body of the mail)

11. Shall set off this Rs……… (Requesting permission for a money transaction)

12. Done few changes to align with the IWA 2. Please go through.

13. Please nominate me for this program

It was observed that conversational terms mostly occur at the salutation and at the complimentary positions of an e-mail. The following table (Table 04) carries an analysis of data regarding the conversational terms in formal e-mails. It shows the average use of conversational terms in an e-mail.

Sector	Number of conversational terms in a mail (average)
Government Sector	01
Private Sector	03
NGOs	02

Table 04

The result found on this variable was that the private sector uses at least three conversational items in an e-mail followed by the NGO sector with an average of two and the government sector with one.

It is observably evident that language usage is different in different situations of the internet. Language used in the web pages is very different to the language used in e-mails, (mostly personal e-mails) chat groups and virtual worlds.

This current development (the use of conversational terms in business emails) found in formal business communication could be elucidated and clarified in two ways. One is that it could be attributed to the influence of the Internet as a digital discourse on formal business communication. The swiftness and promptness of communication associated with the Internet, through e-mail and other modes of communication, brings it close to real conversation. This seems to eradicate the distance between the sender and the receiver. The speed of communication has brought it close to real face to face conversation by making allowances for the 'turn taking' element in direct speech. Even though in e-mail communication turn taking does not take place immediately, it happens much faster than in formal letters, which are termed snail mails. This immediacy associated with this form of communication has influenced the use of conversational terms in formal business communication through e-mails. The other reason for the use of conversational terms is a pragmatic reason. That is, this may be because of the cultural differences taking place in work places with the effect of globalization and Americanization influenced by Information and Communications Technology including media. It is noted that reverence once associated to position or hierarchy is being eventually

left behind and that terms such as 'sir' 'boss' and 'Mr. or Ms. or Mrs. with the last name is being replaced by the first name, irrespective of the position of the employee in many organizations in Sri Lanka, even though it does not seem to happen rapidly. Thus the use of conversational terms can be attributed to this change of attitude and culture in the current work places. Friendliness and a positive rapport with colleagues, subordinates and superiors are encouraged by modern management strategies. This difference in the relationships in work places is evident in their correspondence.

4. Salutation and Complimentary line

With regard to 'salutation' the findings were interesting as they indicated a marked difference between the government sector and the private sector. While approximately 96% of the government emails in the data used a formal salutation and a complimentary line it was observed that approximately 86% of the private sector emails in the data used an informal salutation and a complimentary line. This formality and informality was adjudged based on the language standards mentioned in the 'variables' section of this paper. Some of the formal salutations found in the data were:

Dear Sir/Madam,

Dear Mr………,

Dear Dr…………,.

Kind Attention: Mr. …………..,

Apart from the above mentioned formal subject lines some informal salutations were also found in formal e-mails. They were considered informal because such salutations are not generally used in traditional formal letters. Some of them were:

Dear Friends,

Dear Colleagues,

Dear All,

Dear Suresh, (First name only)

Dear Pat, (Short name)

Dear Nilantha and Niroshana, (Two first names)

Harsha, (Just the first name)

Greetings Ajith,

Dear PD/Bandara/Steve, (an acronym denoting a designation and two first names).

13% of the data had no salutation at all and all of them were from the private sector.

Below is a table (Table 05) containing the analysis of the salutations.

	% of e-mails with formal salutations	% of e-mails with informal salutations	% of e-mails with no salutations
Government sector e-mails	96%	4%	0%
Private sector e-mails	0%	86.84%	13.16%
NGO emails	2.78%	97.22%	0%

Table 05

With regard to the variable 'complimentary close', the following complimentary closes were noted. It was interesting to observe that most of the complimentary closes found in the data can be categorized as 'informal' according to the language standards of formal letter writing. But, interestingly, unlike the salutation, all the e-mails had some kind of a complimentary close except one, which could have been a mistake.

1. Best regards
2. Thanks
3. Thank you
   Regards

4. Thank you

5. Regards

   Project Officer

6. Regards

   Bandula Somasiri

7. Regards

   Ajith Ananda

   (Name of the Company)

8. Best Wishes

9. Thank you and warm regards,

   Duminda

10. Tks Dumma (abbreviation and short name on the same line)

11. Tks

    Chintaka Silva (Full name)

12. With best regards

    (Name title and organization)

It was also observed that a few e-mails did not give the name of the sender at the end of the mail which is usually part of the complimentary close. This may be because internal mailing systems automatically provide all the relevant details of the sender at the end of the e-mail, such as the name, designation, name, address, phone number, and the web address of the company.

Use of punctuation marks was also observed with regard to the above variable and it was noted that most of the complimentary closes did not have any punctuation marks. As a figure, only 0.2% of all the mails had any punctuation mark. Only 4.02% of all the e-mails had a comma after the salutation.

The result and the finding regarding the salutation was that only the government sector uses formal salutations (96%), and the private and the NGO sectors do not use (Except 2.7% by the NGO) formal salutations in their formal e-mails and that none of the sectors use formal complimentary closes which are traditionally used in formal letters in their formal e-mails as indicated in Table 05.

It is a Dear + salutation which is considered a formal salutation in traditional formal letter writing, such as Dear Mr. Perera, Dear Customer, Dear Sir etc. Absence of this formal element in the majority of data must not be overlooked.

With regard to the farewell note or the complimentary close it was found that none of the three sectors adhered to the conventions on this variable.

Based on this result, conclusion which could be arrived at is that there is a difference between the private sector and the government sector in relation to the language standards of traditional letter writing on the elements of salutation and complimentary close. While 96% of government emails of the data uses a formal salutation and a complimentary close 87% of private sector the data uses an informal salutation and a complementary close. In probing the reasons for this new change in formal communication, the presence of customized signatures or automatic signatures inserted automatically (the text is created by the sender initially and stored in a file) by the mailer software must be taken into consideration. Most of the signatures consist of the full name of the sender, his/her designation, name, address, phone numbers and the website of the company as aforementioned.

Relative absence of formal and traditional complimentary closes such as 'yours sincerely', 'yours faithfully' and 'yours truly' can be attributed to the informality of e-mails as a medium of communication. It can be concluded that e-mail as a distinct method used for formal business communication is developing its own traditions by discarding certain traditions which had been attached to formal letter writing for centuries.

As mentioned in the introduction the research also made an attempt to investigate the process of writing an e-mail and to identify the attitude of the writers on language usage in formal emails. Data for this section of the research was collected from answers to a questionnaire distributed among the writers of the emails which comprise the data of this research.

On the process of writing an e-mail, the questionnaire had the following questions and optional answers.

1.   Do you read and edit e-mails before sending? Yes or No

2.   Do you think that you have to use formal language when sending an official e-mail? Yes or No

3.   Do you think it is alright to use informal abbreviations (such as Tx for Thanks) in official e-mails?

    1.   Of course no

    2.   It is alright

    3.   It depends on the degree of formality required by the message.

    4.   It depends on who the receiver is.

The following table (Table 06) carries the analysis of data for the above questions.

For Question number one, on editing e-mails:

Total number of subjects	Percentage of people who edit their e-mail	Percentage of people who do not edit their e-mail
101	75.24%	24.75%

Table 06

As can be observed the majority of the subjects have stated that they re-read or edit their e-mails before sending which in turn indicates that they follow the process of writing a formal business letter.

For question number two on using formal language, the following table (Table 07) carries the analysis.

Total number of subjects	Percentage of people who insisted on formal language	Percentage of people who did not insist on using formal language
101	77.22%	22.77%

Table 07

In contrast to what was evident in the data; use of informal subject lines, unconventional abbreviations, conversational language, informal salutations and complimentary lines, most subjects insisted that formal language must be used for formal business communication.

For question number three whether it was alright to use informal abbreviations in formal business e-mails, the following analysis was carried out. (Table 08).

Total number of subjects	Of course no	It is alright	It depends on the degree of formality required by the message	It depends on who the receiver is.
101	40.59%	7.92%	21.78%	29.70%

Table 08

To the above question, whether it is alright to use informal abbreviations when using e-mails for formal communication, majority of the subjects (40.59%) have strongly disagreed, opting for the first answer which says of course they should not use such abbreviations in formal communication. But in contrast to this interest shown for formal language usage, most of the subjects contradicted themselves in admitting the fact that the degree of formality depends on the type of message and the type of receiver in choosing the last two answers to question

number three making a total of 51.48% (21.78 + 29.70). The fact that approximately 52% of the subjects believe that degree of formally is dependent on the type of message (very important, casual, not very important and the like) and the type of the receiver (superior, subordinate or peers) correlates with the earlier findings of the research discussed under four variables above analyzing the discourse of the emails that the same subjects wrote.

Thus it could be concluded that on par with the literature quoted in this study indicate, the effect of ICT on language is clearly evident and inevitable. It is clear that the language standards prescribed for formal business communication are not adhered to when the mode of communication is not a formal letter but an email.

Findings of this study that the language used for formal business communication through emails is considerably informal in comparison to language standards prescribed for formal letters, is not considered as a negative impact of the Internet but rather as a development and an extension of the traditional standards. The changes in the e-mails used for business communication demonstrates and stands as evidence to a linguistic revolution taking place in the Internet. The phenomenon of Netspeak or Internet language has an impact on formal communication, specially on its diction and the process of formal writing. These changes are also suggestive of the cultural changes taking place in work places.

Thus the current and future students of English for Business Communication must be made aware of these changes and developments and this research will serve as a helpful source document in preparing course material.

Suggestions for further research

As the research area, Internet Language, is quite a new genre, there is lot of room for plenty of new research interests regarding all the aspects of language, specially, lexicography, stylistics and unique features of Internet language. Research must be done with regard to all the situations of the internet, the web, e-mail, chat groups and virtual worlds.

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