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Communicational and methodological/linguistic strategies using electronic mail in a French University.[3]

1. Introduction

This paper addresses the types of computer-mediated communication (CMC) strategies which are currently employed in a French University. In 1998, the newly elected president of the Université Paul-Valéry (Montpellier 3) decided to use electronic mail messages for daily communication with, on the one hand, teaching and research staff, and, on the other hand, technical and administration staff. One of the factors leading us to research official electronic mail (henceforth email) sent out to electronic lists within a higher education perspective is the type of remark, often made by fellow colleagues: such as, 'why are we always invaded by so much email in our electronic letterboxes? The messages are often redundant and don't even concern us directly!' These statements occur frequently and they trigger off questions such as: if people feel *invaded* by email messages, will they actually take time to read them? Does the usage of email as an official equivalent to paper improve or impede internal communication within the University? How? Why? In previous research (Panckhurst 1997-2000) we conducted studies on other forms of electronic mail used in higher education (essentially interpersonal email received from students, colleagues and friends). More recently (Panckhurst 2001), we investigated the discourse appearing in messages within discussion lists and chat sessions, for both on-campus and distance education students. In the current study we research the discourse involved in official email sent by one person to two main University electronic lists: l-chens@univ-montp3.fr and l-iatos@univ-montp3.fr This should not only help to answer the initial questions indicated above concerning the quality of communication, but also help to extend the comparisons between different types of electronic discourse corpora in our evolving and increasingly technological world.

2. Mediated electronic discourse

We suggest that the discourse appearing in email messages, discussion lists and chat sessions is shaped in a particular way, precisely because one uses a computer[4]. The computer becomes a tool, a sort of mediator, indirectly modifying the discourse within a computer-mediated communication environment. A new discourse 'genre' which we call *mediated electronic discourse* (henceforth MED) is created. Others refer to 'Netspeak'[5] or oral-written hybrid forms (Anis, 1999); we posit that although MED is similar to oral forms for some aspects and similar to written forms for other aspects, we really are confronted with a totally new genre of discourse. Some of the main (linguistic or extra-linguistic) features of MED are listed below[6]:

MED simulating oral communication:

> *smileys* to introduce non-verbal semiological aspects (:-) for a smile, for instance); words in uppercase, which according to the 'Netiquette' indicate anger or annoyance; lengthening or repetition of letters, which, in certain cases may simulate intonation, and therefore indicate some paraverbal information; specifically linguistic indications including closure verbs like 'reparler' ('I'll talk to you again soon' - colleague referring to a later email message), or certain categories of mistakes typical to oral situations (*Je vous envoie **mon** nouvelle adresse électronique – I'll send you my new email address* – the possessive should be 'ma' and not 'mon' in this French example); usage of turntaking in oral discourse with typographical marks such as '>'or '|' indicating a repetition of the other person's discourse when replying to an email message or within discussion lists/chat sessions.

MED similar to written communication:

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[3] The authors would like to thank Sophie David and Fay Panckhurst for their constructive criticism and suggestions.

[4] This seems to be true within a higher education system, but we suspect these remarks could also be valid in other areas.

[5] The term 'Netspeak' is an alternative to Netlish, Weblish, Internet language, cyberspeak, electronic discourse, computer-mediated communication […]. As a name Netspeak is succinct […], as long as we remember that 'speak' here involves writing as well as talking, and that any 'speak' suffix also has a receptive element, including 'listening and reading' (Crystal, 2001:p.18).

[6] Solely general indications are given here (see Panckhurst 1997, 1998, 1999, for thorough coverage).

Greater usage of nouns than verbs — written language is lexically dense and grammatically sparse (whereas the opposite is true for oral usage, see Gadet 1996 and Haliday 1989); traditional usage of interrogative and negative forms for the French language (i.e., solely intonative forms with a mere question mark to indicate the interrogative, or absence of 'ne' for a 'ne…pas' negative are rare).

MED specific:

predominant usage of the present tense (often over 60%) as opposed to imperfect/past, future, conditional, imperative; first person pronouns generally feature more prominently (as compared to second and third person pronouns) in online communication than in other written forms; verbs are generally used at an even lower percentage (much lower than 20%) compared to other written forms (over 20%), and among verbs used, modals are frequent (between 20 and 30% of overall verb usage)

Other features which describe email communication are: conciseness, rapidity, anguish/worry (if a long silence is observed before responding to messages), agressiveness, impulsiveness, an (illusionary) impression of proximity, protective barriers (no direct face-to-face contact), etc.

Following on from this general description of some of the linguistic and extra-linguistic features of MED, the analysis and interpretation of results relating to a particular corpus may now be presented.

3. Corpus: presentation and analysis

As specified above, we take internal communication within a French University as a focal point of our study. First we present the historical context of the University before indicating the communicational context (senders and receivers) and typology of the electronic corpus analysed.

The University of Montpellier is one of the oldest universities in Europe. It was founded on the 26th october 1289 after the Universities of Paris and Toulouse. It is now divided into 3 separate institutions. Our University (Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3), has a major project for distance, open and virtual lifelong learning. The newly designed METICE (Multimédia, enseignement, technologies de l'information et de la communication éducatives — Multimedia, teaching, educational information and communication technologies) centre started up its online working environment in 2000. Several (parts of) diplomas are now operating (using the WebCT platform) and more will be made available in the near future. A recent regional project has initiated further multi-disciplinary collaboration between all Montpellier higher-education institutions by pooling resources. Our University is a member of this project, thus helping develop a coherent numeric environment for users, students and professors.

Communication « partners »

As is the case for communication between the Ministry of Higher Education and our University[7], the main services within our institution (henceforth UPV) all communicate by email (as well as more traditional methods). For the corpus at hand, we have studied one-way email messages sent by the current president of UPV, Michèle Weil, to the two main electronic lists, l-chens@univ-montp3.fr (lecturers, professors and research staff) and l-iatos@univ-montp3.fr (technical and administration staff). The 'partners' of the communication by email in this specific context are therefore, on the one hand, the president as the person making email 'utterances', the addressor, and, on the other hand, the staff[8], who are automatically members of the list and receive all messages sent (up to 1000 people). In a French context, it may be important to indicate that the president is an academic who is elected for a 5 year period and then steps back down to his/her teaching-research position, which is a fundamentally different situation to that of a director of a major firm, for instance. In this context she has a certain amount of 'power' which is inherent to her position. Although the situation is non-specifically hierarchical, there is, nevertheless, a certain implicit hierarchy or power which is apparent. The addressees who automatically receive the email messages may be divided into two differing categories: (a) those to whom the message is primarily intended and (b) those to whom the message is sent. The difference is subtle: a message is sometimes sent to (a) particular person(s) with a copy of the message to the lists, or a message is sent to the whole list (or to both lists), but it does not necessarily *concern* the entire staff[9].

Typology, issues at stake, corpus constitution, colleagues' points of view

Email messages sent to the staff are usually classified according to the following typology: memoranda, general announcements, decisions, minutes from meetings, etc. Of course, a certain number of issues are implicitly at stake within this type of discourse, relating to speech acts (Austin, Searle[10], Benveniste) and referring to particular

[7] Over the past several years, one of the major renovations within the higher education system has been the switch over to email communication. Main email communication in this context has been entirely available for 2 years.

[8] Although technically speaking, those who belong to one list don't receive email messages solely addressed to the other list, some exceptions are made, for instance, for academics who also have administrative responsibilities, and who might therefore receive messages sent to both lists. In this specific case, two identical messages may be received.

[9] The president communicated with us on this point: 'I have asked various services to prepare email address lists according to differing boards, commissions, departments, etc. When this is obtained, it will allow a more targeted form of communication, more rare and thus more efficient. Of course this is not necessarily a desirable point for some, as retaining information is a potential source of power.'

[10] Searle's traditional classification for speech acts may be useful in this context: *representatives* (affirm, believe, conclude, deny, report); *directives* (ask, challenge, command, insist, request), *commissives* (guarantee, pledge, promise, swear, vow), *expressives* (apologize, deplore, congratulate, thank, welcome), *declarations* (I resign, I baptize…).

verb usage, for instance. In the following short analysis, we indicate several directions which expose varying strategies and discourse orientation. This analysis should help to define what is in fact communicated, how it is done, and whether the communication is generally improved or impeded.

The corpus originally contained more than 400 messages received from the president over a two-year period (spanning from 2000 to 2002). However, only 132 of these had been sent directly to the electronic lists. The size of the resulting corpus is thus as follows: 132 messages; 131 pages, 51 130 words, 313 844 characters (no spacing), 363 495 (spacing), 2 276 paragraphs, 6 759 lines. Before examining this corpus, we also sent an email message to the two electronic lists asking the following question: *'Croyez-vous que l'utilisation du courrier électronique pour l'envoi de messages sur les listes (l-chens, l-iatos, etc.) soit de nature à améliorer la communication interne à l'université?'* [Do you think that use of email for sending messages to the University lists improves internal communication within the University?] All of the answers received by colleagues were adamant that general communication was improved, but there were other aspects which, it was suggested, could be improved or modified. We summarise these remarks below[11], before proceeding with the linguistic and argumentative analysis:

- colleagues need minimum training in information and communication technologies (why send an attached file if the contents can be placed directly in the email message?; messages need to be legible, and not, for instance correspond to copies of announcements typed in large font destined for notice boards; some colleagues write stylised, long messages when they need to be concise and to the point);
- certain senders convey an initial message to the lists, and then send a second message (a short time after) to rectifiy or send some supplementary or contradictory information. Email usage is sometimes too impulsive;
- the two electronic lists do not have the same impact; administrative and technical staff are present in their offices daily. This is not necessarily true for teaching and research staff who may have more difficult access to machines and therefore may read their messages later than administrative and technical staff;
- colleagues who are authorised to send messages (directly, without 'moderation' by an administrator) to the official lists are, in principle, departmental/service heads. They do not always send solely official administrative and technical information, but rather, other information or opinions. These messages should be confined to the third electronic list, 'upv-l', which is a list specifically designed for messages of a general 'non-official' nature..
- All of the messages do not have the same importance or status. A message concerning an electricity cut and a Ministerial reform cannot be placed on the same scale. Senders need to *categorise* email messages so that they are clearly *identifiable* and *prioritised* for the addressees: decisions and announcements, minutes, conferences, etc. need to be clearly stipulated as such in the 'subject' of the message.

Computational linguistic and argumentative analysis

We used two computational linguistic tools for French (Cordial, Nomino) which allowed extraction of mainly morphological and syntactic information. We also devised a short computer programme (using Perl) in order to extract combinations of grammatical categories. The first point concerns sentence types: in the president's discourse, mainly assertives are used (98%) compared to only 1.1% for interrogatives and 0.9% for exclamatives. Sentences are concise and paragraphs are short (2 sentences on average, compared to 4 for literary and journalistic style). The main verbal tense used is the present (61.6%). The second aspect concerns grammatical categories within sentences; the following figure compares the current corpus (the top bar) with other written corpora. As already suggested in other email studies, noun usage is extremely high here (66.4% of overall categories) as compared to verbs (only 15.4%).

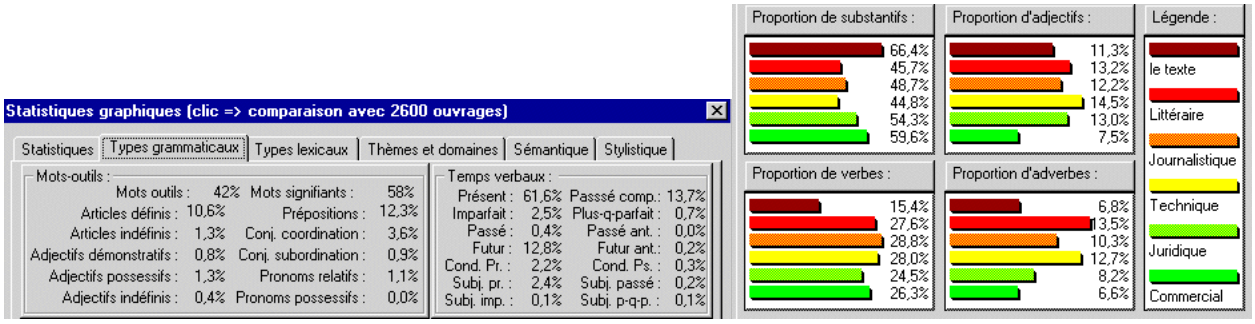

Figure 1

Among the 302 different verbs used (types) for a total of 841 occurrences (or tokens, Nomino; 822 for Cordial), auxiliaries and semi-auxiliary modals are in frequent use (26.6% of overall verbs). We present below a list of 31 verbs which occur frequently within the MED (according to classification by Nomino, down to a frequency level of 5); auxiliaries and semi-auxiliary modals are indicated in italics:

être	115	gérer	11	devenir	6	agir	5
avoir	66	venir	11	penser	6	manger	5
faire	29	*devoir*	9	organiser	6	inviter	5
remercier	15	demander	9	attendre	5	construire	5

[11] We have summarised and translated the main remarks here. We would like to thank the 11 colleagues who took the time to respond to our request. The low number of responses (out of almost a thousand people to whom the message was sent) is itself significant.

pouvoir	14	améliorer	8	voir	5	placer	5
permettre	14	prendre	8	trouver	5	commencer	5
falloir	12	ouvrir	7	envoyer	5		
vivre	12	obtenir	7	recevoir	5		

It may be of interest that *pouvoir*, *falloir*, *devoir* appear in much more frequent use than *savoir, vouloir* and *cr*oire[12]. The discourse therefore seems to be full of important obligations and constraints (*falloir* + *devoir* = 48.8%, 'les syndicats *doivent* être consultés' — the unions must be consulted, 'il nous *faut* davantage de moyens' – we need more means); the emphasis on achieving objectives is high (*pouvoir:* 32.5%, 'nous *pouvons* et devons cependant faire mieux' — we *can* and must do better), however, over 40% of the occurrences of *pouvoir* are actually combined with a negative form which seems to convey that problems are often difficult to resolve. The discourse also seems to be orientated towards reacting, responding to outside situations. The president does not always initially convey to the addressees that she *knows* or *believes* that the situations are indeed complex; actions and aims are stipulated, but it is not always clear what knowledge (*savoir*) or beliefs (*croire*) they are based on.

First and second person subject pronouns (71%) are extremely high compared to third person subject pronouns (29%)[13], and this indicates that the discourse is well anchored between communication partners (for example: '*Nous sommes prêts à y travailler avec vous*' — We are prepared to work through this with you). Third-person subject pronouns have not been studied in depth here; it may transpire that the number is lower than first and second person pronouns mainly because third-person pronouns are anaphoric, and anaphors only really appear when there are several sentences. As the current discourse contains short sentences and paragraphs, it seems that people and things tend to be referred to directly by (proper) name/noun rather than by pronoun, which of course also concords with the percentages indicated in Figure 1 above. Herring (1996) also mentions lower usage of third-person pronouns in MED.

Another interesting issue is to verify (1) how the speaker, or writer, defines her own discourse and in what way she relates to it, i.e., through *status* ('votre dévouée présidente' — your devoted president), *anthroponymic* usage ('Madame Weil', 'Michèle Weil'), or on a more *personal* level (usage of subject pronouns: 'je', 'nous'); (2) how she refers to people she is addressing; (3) whether the discourse itself seems 'opaque' or 'transparent'.

The president seems to mainly situate her discourse at a personal level ('je') or semi-personal ('nous') as regards the definition of her discourse given the high percentage of first person pronouns used: *nous (équipe de direction) étions déterminés hier matin à obtenir la libération de l'étage administratif occupé par les grévistes depuis vendredi dernier'* — yesterday morning, we (the managing team) were determined to get the administration floor back, which has been occupied by the strikers since last Friday; '*D'avance je remercie toute notre communauté, que je me devais d'informer'* — I would like to thank the whole community, which I felt obliged to inform. Among the first person plural pronouns (*nous* — we), 3 categories could have been used: (a) *nous*, referring to the president (*je*) + her managing team; (b) the formal *nous*, corresponding to the royal 'we' in English; (c) the university community as a whole. In actual fact, the royal *we* is not once used, and categories (a) and (c) are used at rates of 50.9% and 49.1%, respectively. Anthroponymic usage appears in only ten occurrences and mention of status is rare: 'votre dévouée présidente' appears only three times. The addressees are considered either directly ('vous') or indicated according to status ('chers collègues, chers IATOS' — dear colleagues, dear administrative staff, appears ten times). However, more often than not there is no opening phrase, and the email message starts as follows: 'j'ai le plaisir de vous annoncer' — I am pleased to announce. When she mentions other people or services within the university, they are named, either through status and/or personally): 'service financier' — finance department, 'groupe apogée' — the Apogée group, 'le professeur X' — professor X, 'personne resource planning' — the resource timetable person, etc. The discourse is instrumental; the main aim is to inform the University community clearly without using metaphors or implicit discourse which could lead to misinterpretations or feeling obliged to fill in gaps. When mentioning events, Michèle Weil uses a certain number of adjectives in relation to nouns which qualify either negatively or positively, according to the situation; given that the University experienced a long strike period one could have encountered many negative adjectives and nouns. However, both types in fact occur rather systematically: *negative* examples ('dysfonctionnement grave' serious dysfunction, 'invasion dangereuse' dangerous invasion, 'nuisance actuelle' current disturbance, 'charge épuisante' exhausting responsibility, 'conséquence néfaste' disastrous consequence); *positive* examples ('voie innovante' innovative means, 'revendication légitime' legitimate demand, 'action ambitieuse' ambitious action, 'image internationale' international image, 'service majeur' important service).

4. Mediated electronic discourse (MED) and foreign language methodology

The characteristics of electronic communication, described above, now need to become an inherent part of the teaching-learning cycle. As regards (native, second or foreign) language methodology, electronic communication must become a new kind of teaching resource. 'Motivation' and 'gratification' are the main considerations which plead in favour of this in the language classroom. Writing an email message is gratifying for the learner, giving him/her pragmatic satisfaction (control of new technical and semiolinguistic knowledge) and hedonic satisfaction (pleasure related to construction of the message, and to the initation of an immediate 'personal' or 'transactional'

[12] *pouvoir:* 32.5%, *falloir:* 27.9%, *devoir:* 20.9%, *savoir:* 9.3%, *vouloir* & *croire:* 4.7% each, or 2 occurrences.

[13] Among the first and second persons, 41.2% refers to first person usage and 29.8%% to second person usage. The pronoun 'on' (referring to 'we' or the indefinite 'one' in French) corresponds to 3.3% of the total. We have divided this accordingly, into either first-person (78%) or third-person (21.9%), depending on the context.

relationship with others). At the methodological level, the advantages of this new corpus are numerous: orientating the pedagogy of written expression towards scriptural practices which postulate a real receiver (who is not only the teacher, as it is often the case in formal school situations involving exercises such as narrations, commentaries, essays, etc.). Written expression therefore becomes a socialised scriptural practice and not only a formal one.

Like 'authentic' documents, electronic mail as a teaching resource must help develop *true communicative competence* (cf. Hymes, 1984). The most important idea is that electronic mail can be 'operationalised', i.e., transposed into *general* and *specific aims* (cf. Richterich, 1985). For instance, a general objective like 'initiate, practice writing an email message' can be included in projects *centered* around the important notion of communicative competence and of the various (linguistic, sociocultural, discursive and pragmatic) components which structure it. In order to be truly pedagogical, this sort of project requires *general* and *specific* aims to be defined. These aims account for conditions in which various language acts are carried out, in connection with a communicative macro-act such as 'argue' (refute a thesis, deny, reject, accuse, apologise, justify, denounce), the *status* of communication partners, the *intentions* which motivate them, the *illocutionary* and *perlocutionary effects* and finally the *linguistic achievements* they seek to produce. This sort of approach can take the form of *expressive projects* (rather than corrective or formal measures).

From a methodological point of view, operationalisation of electronic communication (henceforth EC) allows one to reflect on definitional, organisational and discursive methods and finally teaching modalities. This preliminary work in relation to the teaching situation allows to clearly identify the desired *knowledge* and *know-how*, the learner's *behavior*, and the *performances* which are expected by the end of the teaching course. Generally speaking, the fundamental methodological question remains the following: 'what do we want the learners to achieve after following a course on EC?' 'Which (linguistic, enunciative, sociopragmatic) competencies do they need to acquire?' 'What types of performances must they be capable of carrying out?' In this *systemic* approach, the essential methodological questions can be defined as follows:

- What are the (semiotic, linguistic, discursive…) characteristics of EC?
- What are the typological specificities?
- How is EC organised and how does it function? (does it correspond to written forms? oral forms?)
- What is the nature of the communication under consideration: 'interpersonal' or 'transactional'?
- What are the language acts, taking into account given situations, used in the teaching/learning context (writing to get information, to inform, to denounce, to support, to congratulate, to give an opinion?…)

Once these questions have been answered, pedagogical processing of EC can be articulated around projects with two major aims: (1) interpersonal communication and (2) transactional communication. The first aim could be articulated around methodological subjectivity (cf. Bouguerra, 2001), including:

- enunciative dimensions (how one refers to oneself and to others, enunciative choices and discursive strategies)
- evaluative and appreciative modalities (qualifying adjectives, adverbs of opinion)
- minimal or maximal distance (modal auxiliaries, subjunctives and conditionals)
- expression of subjectivity (personal pronouns, qualifying adjectives, lexicon of emotion, extralinguistic typographical markers (smileys…)
- ludic and aesthetic tonalities (humour, literary marks)

The second transactional communication aim concerns:

- construction of the referent (substantives and deictics)
- methods of centring on oneself, the referent, the other
- aesthetics related to reception: avoiding irritability factors of the receiver (importance of modalisers).

It is also important to deal with openings, development and closure within the exchanges (discursive routines, observing interaction modes, interpretation norms).

5. Conclusion

The answer to the initial question 'does the usage of email improve internal communication within the University' seems to be 'yes, but…'. We have presented a succinct linguistic and argumentative analysis along with colleagues' suggestions for improvement. Methodological approaches in language learning situations have also been explored. One of our conclusions is that the writer/sender of an email message should try to render the message as informative and explicit as possible, and always focus on how the reader/receiver/addressee might interpret the message, even if we know, as the French theorist Roland Barthes suggested, that 'it is the reader who constructs the text's meaning, always reading in meanings which cannot be found within the text itself. Texts, in this view, have no separate identity: they exist only when they are read' (Crystal, 1997, p.79). The reader/addressee should not have to interpret or fill in gaps. Certain aspects may irritate, i.e., usage of verbs such as 'win', lose', etc. In one particular message we analysed, these verbs were used repeatedly, together with discourse strategies including high usage of first person subject pronouns and *directives*, according to Searle's *Speech Acts*. Further studies now need to be conducted on other corpora containing email messages sent to electronic lists and received from them; this will help understand better how the receiver interprets the messages and two-way communication can therefore be fully tackled. We do believe, however, that the level of general communication has improved since the current president decided to encourage colleagues to use email massively. We do suggest that certain discourse and organisational aspects, some of which we have mentioned here, be modified though, in order to improve the internal communication within our institution.

The methodological approach of EC, because it is at the heart of daily communication, because it renews interindividual communication modes, teaching contents, the nature of didactic resources, pedagogical tasks and activities, the conception of language and communication, should lead to real (linguistic, semiotic and sociopragmatic) teaching/learning centered on expression, on truly *expressive projects* (cf. Coïaniz, 1996). For language methodology and didactics, this type of corpora represents new sorts of knowledge to be transmitted and new paths to explore.

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