

Hybrid Language: A Study of E-mail and Miscommunication

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Electronic communication is a hybrid of spoken, written and digital communication. Using linguistic theories and ethnographic methods, this paper examines how the unique language composition of email contributes to miscommunication between individuals. Until written language evolves to account for electronic media, careful reading and writing of email, recognition of its hybrid nature, and occasionally bypassing it as a communication channel, can assist in avoiding or correcting miscommunications.

"Writing evolves when language has to take on new functions in society" M.A.K. Halliday (6)

The content and structure of information is affected by its media. (8) The newness and widespread use of electronic communication makes it a rich area for the study of changes in language use. Initial linguistic analyses describe email as containing characteristics of both spoken and written language. (2)(3) Following the premise that electronic communication is a hybrid of spoken, written and digital communication, I examine how that unique composition contributes to miscommunication between individuals. Miscommunication can occur both in the writing and the reading of email, which can hinder resolution of specific miscommunication events. I propose strategies for clear email communication, and areas for further study of these fascinating new language developments.

THE STUDY

This preliminary investigation is based on linguistic theory and ethnographic methods. The theories of M.A.K. Halliday and William Chafe on the relative properties of spoken and written communication are particularly useful. The ethnographic data came from a year of participant observation, supplemented by fourteen interviews and more than 200 pages of email conversations. The interview subjects represent a wide range of ages, occupations, and computer experience. This overview is intended as a precursor to intensive, statistically-structured surveys.

LANGUAGE AND E-MAIL

Properties of Spoken and Written Communication

Written language is not merely a visible representation of spoken language, nor is spoken language an audible representation of written language. They are not mutually exclusive forms, but exist on a continuum, with each tending toward certain characteristics. (5)(1) People are more aware of the form and content of their writing than their speech. Halliday refers to writing as being "self-monitored," while speech is "natural and unselfconscious" (5) He demonstrates that written communication has a higher informational content ratio, which he calls "lexical density"; whereas, spoken communication is more complex in structure, containing a higher percentage of non-lexical items. Because of the increase in non-lexical items and dependent clauses, spoken language is more grammatically intricate than written language. (5)(6) Chafe uses the terms "integrated," for written language, and "fragmented," for spoken language, to explain a similar concept (8). Perhaps the most interesting of Halliday's premises is that writing creates a *product*, while speaking is a *process*:

Speaking and writing—each one makes the world look like itself. A written text is an object; so what is represented in writing tends to be given the form of an object. But when one talks, one is doing; so when one talks about something, one tends to say that it happened or was done. (5)

Chafe also posits these spoken/written contrasts:

- More time to edit versus "on the fly." Writers have the luxury of thinking through words and phrases, making careful selections, and editing. Speakers must choose words and phrases as they go. Once spoken, a word cannot be edited out.
- Literary versus colloquial vocabulary. Where a writer might say "my children," a speaker might choose "my kids," creating a freshness absent in formal writing.

- Decisive versus vague. In choosing language more carefully, writers seldom resort to spoken qualifiers such as “sort of,” or “I guess.” (1)

	Writing	Speaking
Halliday	lexical density	complex grammar
	self-monitored	natural, spontaneous
	product	process
Chafe	time to edit	immediate choices
	literary vocabulary	colloquial vocabulary
	more decisive	more vague

Effect of Electronic Media on Communication

Based on my observations and Danet's work, I have derived the following characteristics of email.

Pseudo-Realtime of Email. Speed of transmission is a critical area which blurs the lines between written and spoken. Email correspondents have a sense of it as real-time conversation and tend to make immediate responses. Writers type rapidly, ignoring rules of spelling and formal writing. They use conversational grammar, thereby decreasing informational density and increasing grammatical complexity. People also read email quickly, often missing important points intended by the writer, and guessing at the writer's facial expression and voice tone.

Expression of Emotion. Writing often neutralizes the expression of negative emotion; however, in email, “we find a striking tendency to sudden flare-ups of anger and insult, known in the e-world as ‘flaming.’” (2) The personal interactions, conversational tone, and safety of not being face-to-face open a space for the expression of human emotion. The near-immediacy of email encourages responding in the midst of unexamined emotion. One participant said, “I sent back an angry response immediately.” Those who have received flames but never sent them regard them in a derogatory manner, as something harmful that should not be tolerated. Those who have deliberately sent flames see them as necessary. One participant even said, “A good flame war is cathartic every now and then.”

Several conventions have arisen to handle emotional interchange. “Emoticons” are pictorial representations of emotions using typographical symbols (viewed sideways), such as:

;-) ;'(:D <:-)

A participant who frequently uses emoticons lamented a fellow correspondent's failure to do so, “I have been faced with the situation of deciding whether what they wrote was being [silly], serious or aloof.” Other conventions include using capital letters to denote shouting, inserting facial descriptions like <g> or <grin> to denote humor, and placing asterisks around words to denote vocal emphasis.

Different Physical Cues. Lack of facial expression and voice tone is a primary characteristic of email, and a major cause of miscommunication. However, with the loss of those sensual cues, comes the addition of visible words, which carry their own sensual cues. As one respondent put it: “It looks totally different printed. More personal.” Words which would normally be spoken and heard are, instead, written and seen.

Flame email is one effect these visual cues can create. The conversational nature of email invites emotional interchange; but its appearance as written text gives it a more tangible quality than words merely spoken in anger. The fact that a burst of anger via email has its own special term indicates the weight which the written text carries for the reader.

Commonly used emoticons and typographical conventions provide additional visual cues, and successfully convey meaning otherwise lost in this hybrid medium.

Descriptive Subject Lines. Unlike letter envelopes which must be opened before a subject line can be seen, email recipients see subject lines before opening the complete message. A descriptive, non-emotional title can enhance communication; an emotionally-charged title can start a reaction before the full message even appears on the screen.

Ephemeral Medium. Email is more permanent than a spoken conversation, but more temporary than most writing. Unlike speech, which happens and is gone, email allows for rereading of conversational language, without the benefit of instant interchange. On the other hand, most email is deleted shortly after receipt.

Brevity of Email/Use of Keyboard. Typing is slower than speaking, but email writers often think in speech-mode and wish to get their thoughts across quickly. Danet observes a “strong trend on the Net toward legitimization of speech-like writing, and tolerance of disfluencies and spelling mistakes or typos, in personal, and even in informal business communication.” (3) To facilitate speed of communication, email writers will:

- Abbreviate, e.g., “info” for “information”

- Use acronyms, e.g., “IMHO” for “in my humble opinion”
- Eliminate first person pronouns, e.g., “walked to the office,” for “I walked to the office”

One respondent summarized this desire for brevity:

On email my sentences are shorter. Perhaps even curt. I try to write as little as possible to express what I want to say. Email is more immediate than writing a letter. I type considerably quicker than I write and typing does not strain my hand the way writing with a pen does. As a medium email is a lot more direct. On paper I am poetic, my sentences flow more.

Somewhere Between Formal and Informal. The language of email is in a state of rapid evolution. Danet points out that email correspondents are unsure about how formal and “correct” or how informal and colloquial email should be. (2)(3) While the level of formality is largely dictated by the purpose of a message, the characteristics of the medium profoundly impact the style and choices made by email writers.

Email as Conversational Writing

It is clear that email exhibits characteristics from both columns of the writing/speaking table.

Writing	Email	Speaking
lexical density	<----- -->	complex grammar
self-monitored	<----- ----->	natural, spontaneous
product	<----- ----->	process
time to edit	<----- ----->	immediate choices
literary vocabulary	<----- -->	colloquial vocabulary
integrated	<----- ----->	fragmented
more decisive	<----- ----->	more vague

Most of these hybrid characteristics of email are evident in the following description from a respondent (received via email):

Without voice inflection, facial expression, gestures, response to the others visual reaction, it is easy to misintrepret what the other meant and there is not the immediate ability to check it out. Thus our minds go to work on “making it up.” This is less likely to happen in face to face or even on the telephone. It can happen in letters but I somehow believe that we often (at least I do) write a little mroe [sic] carefully in ltrs [sic] than email. Spelling is a good exam-

ple. In a letter, I will usually check or correct spelling, at least partially. In email I don't. Somehow it seems far more spontentous, casual, free flowing, and if my intent is there I don't worry about typo and spelling. I think that kind of thinking makes us—me at least—much less thoughtful, careful, about how I articulate [sic] things. I usually choose my words fairly carefully but less so in email.

MISCOMMUNICATION IN EMAIL

All but one of the participants had experienced miscommunications via email. One respondent even said it occurred, “Nearly every day.” The question, “How did the miscommunication start?” brought answers that were alternately expected, surprising, and amusing:

- “By one person writing something, and the other responding.”
- “By too hurried reading of a message.”
- “They were trying to make a joke and I missed it completely.”
- “One or the other responded in a way that the originator hadn't intended.”
- “I didn't follow my own ‘rule’ to re-read my email before it's sent. One time, I misread something that was sent and responded to what I thought had been written. The recipient also misread my response and sent a ‘flame,’ a how-could-you letter. Another time, something I wrote was misinterpreted (I had mentally put the emphasis on one word; the reader put it on another word, changing the meaning).”
- “At that time, I didn't know that all caps meant shouting. I got a scolding message back, and have never used caps again.”

Miscommunications can result from erroneous assumptions made by either party. Halliday states, “What creates writing is not the particular shapes that are used; it is the way the shapes are interpreted.” (6) Likewise miscommunication in email often occurs not in the writing of it, but in the reading of it. Thereafter, additional writing in a conversational style can complicate the miscommunication.

As stated by one participant, “I don't like long emails, trying to read them on the screen is annoying.” The prevalence of that dislike makes for cursory reading, and increases the chances that important lexical and non-lexical messages will be missed.

RESOLUTION OF MISCOMMUNICATION EVENTS

Email miscommunications are either resolved via continued email or in direct conversation. If not resolved, the conversation thread is dropped altogether.

Participant Resolution Strategies

Via Email. Once a miscommunication has occurred, the preferred venue for resolution is continued. If the situation can be resolved in that manner, resolution occurs within two to three transmissions each:

- “We resolved the misunderstanding by sending two or three Email [sic] back and forth explaining to each other how we each read the Email.”
- “Most instances were resolved with one explanatory email.”
- “The problem was resolved after a couple of explanations.”
- “Just 2 or 3 posts back and forth.”

Face-to-Face Communication. If the special characteristics of email contributed to the miscommunication, then resolution may not be possible by continued email. When resolution fails after “two or three tries,” many people turn to direct communication, if possible, either in person or by telephone:

- “I finally resorted to the telephone.”
- “Finally, I went down and sat in his office and spoke with him.”
- “The lady and I met and the ‘flame’ disappeared.”
- “Most of the remainder of the conversation was carried on directly.”

Beyond the Threshold. When a miscommunication threshold has been reached, and direct contact is impractical or impossible, communication threads, and sometimes personal relationships, are cut off. This is accomplished either by sending no response, or using a short answer to terminate the conversation.

- “I chose to end the conversation with a single line e-mail: ‘I wish you well.’”
- “[I] stopped trying due to fear of it getting worse.”
- “I chose to end the dialogue.”
- “I stopped trying after the second email.”

- “Suddenly I got a don't-write-me-anymore letter. No response to my follow-up emails, either.”
- “I eventually just dropped the ‘conversation.’”

Recommendations for Avoiding or Resolving Miscommunication Events

These theories and observations imply some strategies for clarity of email communication:

Writing Email.

- Use punctuation consciously.

In a formal message use the standard rules of punctuation. In a conversational message, use punctuation and typographical conventions to convey speech patterns and emphasis. “Punctuation can be used either grammatically, that is, according to the rules of written language, or can be used to convey the rhythm, and thereby the meaning of spoken phrases.” (5)

- Use descriptive vocabulary or visual representations to express emotion

Emoticons and exclamation points are never used by some, and used by others to excess. The most successful email communicators use them judiciously, to emphasize non-verbal emotional tone of a word or phrase that might otherwise be missed by an email reader.

- Re-read email before sending

The following statements were characteristic of responses received from study participants: “I have experienced a few miscommunications in email conversation, usually when I send something quickly and don't re-read it from an objective, first-time-reader position”; and, “One of the tools that I apply is to re-read my written words . . . to try to be expressive.”

Reading Email.

- Careful but not meticulous reading

A few extra seconds to slow the intake of an email message could save considerable time by diverting a potentially frustrating interchange. One respondent curtly replied to a correspondent with whom a miscommunication had arisen, “Try reading my mail before you respond.” However, avoid detailed dissection of conversational text. Such intense reading of an ephemeral interchange can impose emphasis and meanings not originally intended by the author.

- Read the conversation aloud

Because spoken language came before written language, and because its forms have an often unexamined

effect on our written communications, Halliday proposes reading aloud a paragraph that does not make sense at first, allowing the reader to "hear" it in spoken form. (6) This same technique could prove extremely valuable in catching the nuances of written email conversations.

AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The potential for future studies is vast and exciting in this new medium of global culture.

- Are there significant differences in comprehension and miscommunication when reading email aloud and reading silently.
- Do fewer or different kinds of email miscommunications occur in character-based writing systems, such as Chinese, rather than sound-based writing systems, such as English.
- What are the effects of transmitting the same information via different media: email, letter, memo, telephone, voice mail.
- In what order is information conveyed in the hybrid form of email. One of Macaulay's conclusions is that information in sentences is directional: "back or left-directed for written text" and right-directed for oral text. Analyzing electronic communications in light of her findings could prove most revealing.

CONCLUSION

Electronic communication is changing the face of written language. New words, pictographs, grammar, conventions, are appearing and rapidly gaining acceptance. The evolution of writing, however, has not kept pace with the realities of online communication. This lag creates an environment for miscommunication in electronic media, particularly email. Miscommunications arise in the reading of email as well as the writing of it. Until such time as written language develops sufficiently to overcome the challenges inherent in electronic media, careful reading and writing of email, recognition of its hybrid nature, and even occasionally bypassing it as a communication channel, can assist in avoiding or correcting miscommunications between human beings. Additionally, the continued use of email as a prominent means of communication will, of necessity, force the evolution of writing systems to account for the peculiarities, advantages and limitations of these not-quite-real-time written conversations.

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