THE LANGUAGE OF EMAIL

Brenda Danet
Professor Emerita of Sociology & Communication
Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Visiting Fellow in Sociology, Yale University

Electronic mail, or email, as it has come to be known, is one of the most popular applications of online digital technologies. The specific technology that made email possible already existed in the 1960s and 1970s, but only 20 or so years later did this new means of communication become truly widespread. By the late 1990s, the expression "You've got mail!" no longer necessarily meant a paper letter waiting in a brightly painted mailbox, and a popular Hollywood movie was created around this theme. Hundreds of millions of people now use email daily for countless purposes, from carrying out administrative tasks and distributing announcements of public events to sharing recipes and keeping in touch with family and friends. In my last lecture I briefly reviewed the main forms of computer-mediated communication, distinguishing between synchronous and asynchronous forms. In that lecture, I emphasized synchronous forms; in today's lecture, I will focus primarily on asynchronous communication, most specifically on two-person email.

Most research on this topic to date has been about *group-based* asynchronous communication, for instance Usenet newsgroups and listserv discussion lists. It is not surprising that the group forms of asynchronous communication have been a popular subject for research: this really *is* a new

form of group communication, making possible extended discussion about an infinite variety of topics among persons of shared interests, without regard for time or place and around the globe. In contrast, two-person email, whether of a public, business nature, or a private and social nature, has hardly been studied, despite the fact that it too has become a mass phenomenon. This seems strange, considering that we are dealing with an important new stage in the history of one-to-one letter-writing, which has been present in human culture since the invention of writing in ancient Mesopotamia about 5000 years ago.

In part the explanation for the neglect of two-person email has to do with research ethics. There is general consensus that group forms like Usenet postings are public in nature, and that collecting and analyzing such material is far less problematic than is the case for private email letters. Even in this context ethical problems do arise—for instance, we need to ask under what circumstances the words of postings may be cited in academic publications. However, the problem is much greater for two-person email: private letters are just that—private, only for the eyes of the writer and the recipient. How, then, can we study this new stage in private letter-writing?

My answer to this dilemma has been to study my own correspondence. It absolves me of the need to ask permission from the recipient—myself—but does not, of course, absolve me of the need to obtain permission wherever possible from letter-***writers***. In this lecture I will draw on two main corpora of email letters: a set of 20 responses to a Call for Papers that I had distributed on the Internet, and an exchange of about 25 letters that I had with the developer of a software

program for bibliography management. Of course this cannot be the solution for all future research on private email, but I believe that in my own case it allowed me to analyze important aspects of the language of email in a time of technological transition, when there have been few norms to guide us. Although my discussion will relate to email composed in the English language, I believe that the general issues raised are pertinent for an understanding of email in other languages too.

Unlike the approach of most other researchers on the language of email and asynchronous communication, my approach is ***holistic, ethnographic and qualitative.*** Most studies to date have been statistical, treating corpora of email letters and postings in the aggregate, that is, showing which features tend to appear with which other features. Instead, I will look closely at a relatively small number of ***whole letters***, including their opening and closings as well as the body of each letter. I do so, in order to highlight ***genre*** aspects, or our expectations about the coordination of form and function of certain types of messages, and how these are changing with the advent of digital technologies.

DOUBLY ATTENUATED, DOUBLY ENHANCED:

UNIQUENESS OF THE DIGITAL MEDIUM

Although text-based online communication is written, it partially resembles oral communication. Many people have commented that composing an email message ***feels like*** talking even though it is written; others have noted that at least in some respects it even ***looks like*** talking—some of its linguistic features resemble those of speech. We have seen in my previous lecture that in

interactive--**synchronous**--modes, digital communication is dynamic and improvisational, as is ordinary conversation. Kathleen Ferrara and her associates, one of the first research teams to study computer-mediated textual communication, proposed to call it "Interactive Written Discourse." In my preferred formulation, digital communication is paradoxically **both doubly attenuated, and doubly enhanced** [transparency #1].

We can think of online typed communication as in some ways less rich than either speech or writing, and therefore **doubly attenuated**. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines "attenuate" as "1. To make thin or slender; 2. To make thin in consistency. 3. fig. To reduce in intensity, force, amount or value." Digital text is clearly a form of writing: pixels on the computer screen are formed into letters and words that we read and write. Digital writing is attenuated because the text is no longer a tangible physical object. Printing is optional in email, and in synchronous modes of typed chat, communication on the fly is the thing, not an optional textual log of what happened.

At the same time, online linguistic communication can also be viewed as **attenuated speech**. Because it is dynamic, interactive and ephemeral, it is like conversation: we can receive instant feedback to our message, and many messages can be exchanged in rapid-fire fashion, **even** in asynchronous email, if the parties both happen to be logged on. Thus, social psychologists such as Sara Kiesler and her collaborators have seen computer-mediated, typed communication as **reduced,** because of the loss of the nonverbal and

paralinguistic cues which contribute importantly to meaning in spoken encounters. Many speak of "reduced bandwidth," in information theory terms.

Paradoxically, it is, I believe, **no less justified** to speak of online linguistic communication as doubly enhanced as it is to claim that it is doubly attenuated. We can say that it is "**enhanced speech**," since, unlike ordinary speech, it leaves traces, and can therefore be re-examined as long as we are logged on, the program is open, and the text is retained in the computer's memory. We can reread what the other person or we have just written.

Similarly, we can speak of digital writing as **enhanced writing**, since in its real-time interactive modes, the medium restores the presence of one's interlocutor, long absent in the production of extensive texts. Moreover, it is far easier to establish immediate communication with the writer of an asynchronous message or text than in the past, making it more dialogic than in print culture. This curious condition of being both doubly attenuated and doubly enhanced means that typed online communication lies between speech and writing, yet is neither: in short, **it is something new**.

A NEW KIND OF LETTER-WRITING

Traditionally, Anglo-American culture has recognized two main categories or sub-genres of letters, typically called the business letter and the social or personal letter. The form and style of these two types of letters have been highly codified. We carry around in our heads a "template"--a pattern or model-- for each type. Drawing on centuries of tradition, manuals for letter-writers have dictated how these two types of letters are to look. In our own times, the most

obvious distinction within the world of official communication was that between the inter-organizational letter and the **intra**-organizational one--the memorandum, popularly known as the memo.

   We inherited the email format with its initial header from the intra-organizational memorandum. As Joanne Yates, a student of organizational communication, has pointed out, this template was originally invented for intra-organizational communication in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

> **Internal correspondence across distance had long been an accepted part of business, but in the late 19th- and early 20th centuries, considerable correspondence...emerged within facilities as a response to plant growth and systematization. The form and content of this style began to diverge from that of external letters, reflecting the preoccupation with efficiency and system that shaped downward and upward communication. While custom and courtesy restricted the form and style of external letters, internal correspondence evolved in ways intended to make it more functional to read and to handle.**

   In several respects the memo format of email is disconcerting. First, it is, at least in theory, anomalous to use it for communication between organizations. If it was all right to dispense with "custom and courtesy" in the name of efficiency in a paper letter within an organization, it is also all right to dispense with it in email to a person in another organization? Should we regard the header as part of the letter, or merely as a virtual "envelope," which happens to precede the text of the message? Do we need to add an opening and a closing to our message if some of the information customarily supplied this way in a traditional letter is perfectly obvious in the header? What difference does it make whether correspondents are acquainted or not? And if the name of the sender is in the header, why "sign" an email message? Since the "signature" is intangible, it no longer serves as a physical "trace" of the hand of the sender or authenticates the document. In the

past, this was important even in typewritten or word-processed letters, where the sender usually took pains to sign the letter personally.

It is even stranger to use the memo format for purely personal written communication. It invites a "mock-serious," playful tone in personal email. There is something incongruous, even slightly ridiculous about a memo whose subject line reads, say, "recipe for apple cake." Of course, many people have become accustomed to this incongruity. At the same time, though novel, it *is* useful to tell our readers, even in a personal message, what its subject will be, especially if they have to cope with many messages per day. Those growing up with email do not experience this incongruity.

FEATURES OF DIGITAL WRITING

Depending on the technology used, different forms of online communication are located at different points along a continuum from situations which elicit or facilitate the most writing-like use of language at one end, to those which elicit or facilitate the most speech-like use at the other. Email composed offline is likely to be relatively more writing-like in its linguistic features than email composed on the fly when logged on. Offline, there is time to edit; one can use a word-processor and import the letter into the email interface or enclose the edited text as an attachment. However, I believe that few people actually compose most of their email this way today.

The creators of the film "You've Got Mail" put the fictitious email letters exchanged by the leading characters on the film's Website [transparency #2]. Examined closely, these letters do not greatly resemble how people actually

communicate in email. Thus, a letter from "Shopgirl" to "Ny152" is too carefully composed; its sentences are all grammatically well formed; there are no typos and all words are spelled correctly.

Many of the emergent practices and conventions of digital writing originated in hacker usage. The first seven features in this transparency [transparency #3] are devices to compensate for the nature of the medium as attenuated "speech." The last two are devices to help convey the message as fast as possible, since we can't type as fast as we speak; thus, they are writing-specific. Multiple punctuation, some forms of eccentric spelling, asterisks and use of all capital letters for emphasis enhance readers' and writers' ability to experience the words as if they were spoken. We rarely, if ever, encounter them in formal genres of paper-based writing such as business letters or reports, because people have been taught to avoid them. In the past, expressivity had been ***suppressed*** by the teaching of literacy in the schools. Children were taught that a written composition must differ in a host of ways from a spontaneous oral sequence of utterances.

Multiple punctuation and eccentric spelling are common in online writing, not only of children but also of adults. The use of all capital letters, as in "I REALLY LIKE THAT!" is familiar from the comics and street graffiti, especially when the word is a graphic representation of a sound. As I mentioned in my previous lecture, in practice, writing in all caps has generally been discouraged because it is understood as the visual equivalent of shouting. Smiley icons and descriptions of action like *grins* (surrounded by asterisks) supply missing information about

non-verbal aspects of communication. Detested by some and enjoyed by others, smiley icons are more formally called "emoticons"--a conflation of "emotion" and "icon". They are composed of clusters of ordinary typographic symbols such as commas, periods and parentheses. When viewed with the head tilted toward the left shoulder they form "faces". The three shown in the transparency were the best known and most widely used on the Internet. Besides the smile, they include a wink and a frown. Synchronous typed conversations, listserv and Usenet contributions, and even private email are often sprinkled with abbreviations, some of which were already in use before the advent of computers, others, like "LOL" for "laughing out loud" are new.

A growing number of studies has established that email messages are characterized by a distinctive combination of not only "oral" and "written" but also uniquely digital features. Among the speech-like features are contractions and slang, as in "I'm gonna read the book", and colloquial expressions such as "How about?" or "OK." Messages also contain many first and second person pronouns, reflecting high personal involvement. Often, email messages also have many writing-specific characteristics beyond those mentioned earlier. Syntactically, sentences may be complex rather than simple or compound, showing evidence of editing and planning. Other writing-linked features are the use of lists, a high incidence of nominalizations (nouns instead of verbs, "make a payment" instead of "pay") paragraphing--organizing material into chunks separated by white space, and so on. One of the most notable of the features unique to digital letter-writing is the practice of citing even fairly large portions of the letter to which one

is replying. Another digital innovation is signature files, which often only partially resemble traditional business cards.

THE BUSINESS LETTER TEMPLATE

In the Anglo-American tradition, personal letters have always been more conversational and informal than business or official ones. Thus, the transition to a medium that fosters a partially speech-like mode should be less problematic in the case of personal letters than in that of business or official ones, in which the informal style facilitated by the new medium conflicts with traditional norms.

The main features of the business letter template [transparency #4] are probably familiar to most readers. They are shown in the next transparency. The standard paper business letter is supposed be cast in a formal style--to use language appropriate to formal situations. It should contain a formal opening--a formal salutation such as "Dear" + Title + Last Name as in "Dear Dr. Jones"--and a formal closing such as "Sincerely," "Sincerely yours," or "Yours truly"), followed by a signature, First Name + Last Name, on a separate line. Formal letters also often include a pre-closing, such as "Thank you very much" or "I look forward to hearing from you."

TWO HYPOTHESES

In the remainder of this lecture, I will focus on the clash between the requirements of this template and constraints introduced by email technology other cultural factors. I will make a preliminary case for two hypotheses: (1) public or business email practice in the mid-1990s was characterized by a state of ***extreme variability***, reflecting a lack of consensus as to appropriate norms;

10

(2) public or business email practice was drifting toward an emergent style at times more "oral," and even occasionally more playful than traditional official letter-writing style.

I wish to argue that It is especially interesting to look at *first letters* sent by individuals to a stranger, in some business or official capacity, about a matter of some importance to the writer. A first letter of any kind--on paper, a fax, or email, for that matter--is the written equivalent of a first encounter in person. In everyday interaction, we monitor our behavior in the presence of others. When the stakes are particularly high, we are especially careful to stage our behavior to conform to what we perceive to be recipients' expectations and standards. This should be as true for letters as for personal encounters, if not more so.

These hypotheses first began to emerge in my mind when I received three letters from students, all writing with the same request. One studied at a community college in the American mid-West. The second was an undergraduate at a British university, and the third was a graduate student at an American university. The first letter was sent in 1994, and the other two in 1996.

The letter in the next transparency [transparency#5] is a tour de force of playful performance, a far cry from the business letter template. Playfulness is evident, first of all, in the userid TECHNOSMURF in this writer's email address, discernible in the header and at the end of the letter. Smurfs are blue cartoon characters that were a fad in the 1980s. While one's userid is fixed, and the writer might have forgotten that it would appear in the header, he also includes it explicitly and intentionally, alongside his real name, at the bottom of the letter.

This letter lurches between a wildly playful, informal style, out of place in conventional public correspondence, and a strictly formal, even hypercorrect style. Technosmurf begins his letter with the conversational:

```
     *Hello*, Ms. Danet!
```

He brackets "hello" in asterisks, following the practice among initiated emailers of emphasizing certain words to enhance their speech-like quality. However, this is the only time in 11 years of email correspondence that I have ever encountered asterisks in an opening. Technosmurf addresses me formally by title plus last name, but uses an exclamation point, not customary in business communication at all, since it traditionally requires interlocutors to suppress emotion.

His opening remark is indicative of the wildly playful, oral style of much of his letter:

```
     How are ya doin' today?  I feel quite spiffy too!
```

Use of "ya" rather than "you", and dropping the *g* from "doing" are usually encountered only in colloquial speech, and are certainly not appropriate in a business letter. "How are ya doin' today?" could perhaps be Technosmurf's version of the purely ritualistic "How are you?" addressed to strangers in face-to-face encounters, but not appropriate in a first letter to a stranger. The surprising, again strongly colloquial "I feel quite spiffy too!" violates the norm that in written initial interaction between strangers, one does not offer information about one's state of health. Notice also that in effect, Technosmurf supplies what counts as an answer to my implied but unasked question, "And how are *you*?" With these

two utterances, he seeks to establish an unusually dialogic, familiar mode of communication, as if he were acquainted with me personally, and we were chatting more or less as equals on the street. The expression "in acquiring your not-quite-published-yet article" is infelicitous, perhaps reflecting his less than full command of the English language, or difficulties expressing himself in writing. There is a second infelicitous expression: "referred to me in acquiring..."

The pattern of lurching between formal and informal styles reappears in

```
It would help me very much [and thoroughly suprise (sic)
the socks off my English II teacher] if I could get a copy
of this article.
```

The unbracketed part of the sentence is fully formed, conforms with spelling and syntactic requirements, and is entirely in the formal style. The bracketed material, on the other hand, introduces the grossly inappropriate colloquial idiom "surprise the socks off" someone, and contains a misspelling ("suprise")--perhaps just a typo, perhaps not. The brackets suggest that he knew that he was mixing styles.

The next two sentences,

```
I greatly appreciate your help in this matter. Also, I'll
be sure to completely document my sources.
```

conform in every way to the formal style. Finally, he lurches back to the wildly colloquial mode in playful fashion:

```
Thanks a bunch!
[ ... of grapes!]   (:
```

"Thanks a bunch" is much too colloquial for a business letter. Then he introduces a pun-- "bunch" meaning "a whole lot" as well as "bunch" as in "bunch of grapes." Such wordplay is, of course, once again inappropriate in a traditional letter to a professor. Punning foregrounds language, calling attention away from content to

language itself. The effect is humorous. Two more exclamation points, plus a reversed smiley icon, this time without the "nose," complete the text, ending in the same outrageously dialogic, playful mode that he began the letter.

Just what is going on here? Is this student knowingly playing with the conventions of letter-writing and with the emerging ones of communication in cyberspace? Is he showing off, mounting a virtuoso performance? Or is he perhaps a non-native speaker of English, or not well schooled in the norms of paper letter-writing, and struggling with writing difficulties?

While each of these factors may play a role, still another factor may also be involved. Technosmurf was writing to request a copy of a paper about--the "orality" of email. He had read an article in *Wired Magazine* about this topic, in which a then-unpublished paper of mine on the hybrid nature of email was cited. It was to receive a copy of this paper that he had written to me. Given the subject of both Leslie's article and my paper, Technosmurf may have felt that he had license to exaggerate the elements of street talk in his message. Perhaps he wanted to "show his stuff" specifically to me. Be that as it may, two other students who had also read Leslie's article and wrote to ask for the same article did not follow his route. Their letters were far more conventional, departing from the template only in quite minor ways.

ACADEMICS ADRIFT

Encouraged by the preliminary analysis just presented, I identified a more extensive corpus of first letters within the academic context. In 1994-95 I edited a special issue of the online *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* .

All business in connection with this issue was conducted by email. I had solicited papers by distributing a Call for Papers. To assemble a corpus of responses, I screened out all letters that did not meet the criteria of a response from a stranger to its content. This yielded a set of 20 letters. Nine were from students, and eight from academic professionals (in three cases this status could not be determined). Twelve were from males and seven from females (the gender of one person could not be determined). Two wrote from England, and one from Sweden; the rest were American. I analyzed these letters using the criteria of the business letter template. Only one writer ended up as an author in the special issue. The range of variation in form of the letters turned out to be very great.

Overview

With respect to each feature of the template I asked, did each letter conform to it, and if so, coded it "yes." In the case of openings and closings, the letter was coded "yes" *only* if it contained both an appropriate opening and an appropriate closing, e.g., "Dear Prof. Danet" and "Sincerely." Informal openings like "Hi Brenda" and/or informal pre-closings such as "thanks" were coded "no." As for abbreviations, letters were coded as "yes," conforming with the norm, if the writer wrote out, for example, the name of the journal, rather than using the abbreviation *JCMC*, or at least if the name was written out the first time, and then abbreviated. If any of the expectations about spelling and typography were violated, for instance if the writer failed to capitalize the initial letter of a sentence, or used all lower case, or if the letter contained one or more typos, I coded "no" for "spelling/typography." As for punctuation, missing periods, use of exclamation

points or of the device of ellipsis ("went to the store" instead of "I went to the store") , incidence of any of them was coded as not conforming with the template. The results are shown in the next transparency. [transparency #6]

Not a single letter conformed on all seven criteria, though one letter scored 6. One letter scored 0, two each scored 1 and 2; one letter scored 3, ten received a score of 4, three scored 5. It is evident that the numbers are skewed toward an attempt at conformity. This way of analyzing the letters is somewhat arbitrary, since it assigns equal weight to each of the criteria. Moreover, the results are somewhat influenced by decisions such as the one to unite judgments about openings and closings. Despite these limitations, this analysis allows us to compare letters fairly systematically.

The vertical summaries enable us to ascertain which features were most likely to appear, and which were least likely to do so. We see that most letters conformed to expectations regarding syntax and vocabulary, as well as those for spelling, typography and layout, but almost **none** followed paper letter practice regarding openings and closings. Let us look now at letters which deviated from, and which mostly conformed with the template.

The Letter Deviating Most from the Template

The letter receiving a score of 0 is shown in the next transparency [transparency #7]. Already in the header there is a typo and the writer doesn't bother to correct it; instead he adds the correction in parentheses. The letter begins with the informal opening "Hi" (but with a typo) and has no closing other

16

than the writer's name. It is full of ellipses, the first of which come right at the

beginning:

```
just got the email message from the IJVR (?) sorry, only
subscribed recently, and  may have inverted letters) re:
the special edition, and the call for papers...
```

It is nearly one run-on stream of thought. The apostrophe in "it's" is omitted. "Re"

is used incorrectly. He writes "special edition," but he means "special issue."

This letter mixes formal language appropriate to academic writing and to

formal letter-writing generally ("would greatly appreciate if you could forward

further"; "perhaps it may be modifiable and adaptable") with spoken

colloquialisms of academics ("did a paper"; "looking for data evcerywhere [sic]";

"put together"). There are no less than eight typos. The journal name

(apparently, **_Computer Science_**) is abbreviated and in lower case. Other

abbreviations are "info" and "bus. admin." Punctuation is far from standard,

mainly because of the profusion of ellipses. Layout is the only criterion on which

the letter is fairly conventional; however, because there is no white space

between the opening and closing and the body of the letter, I coded this letter

"no" on layout too. Note that although it resembles that of Technosmurf in

deviating so sharply from the template, there is no playfulness here.

<u>Conformity with the Template</u>

In the next transparency [transparency #8] we see a letter that scored 4,

losing a few points because of quite minor deviations, but conforming for the

most part with the template. This letter was unusually long, and showed much

evidence of careful planning. Deviations include the lack of an opening, the

contraction "I've been working", and run-on information about the writer's status on the signature line. However, sentences are well-formed, some of complex structure, carefully edited into paragraphs. Lexical choice is quite formal, e.g., "delighted" rather than "happy" or "glad;" "incorporate" rather than "include." Spelling, typography and punctuation are standard. Instead of referring to the folklore list as FOLKLORE-L, she takes pains to call it the "Folklore List." Similarly, she writes out "American Folklore Society." Her use of MOO is acceptable since the full name is hardly ever used, even on the Net. The language is formal in other respects, e.g., the passive in "A version of this paper *will be delivered*." There is even a conventional closing. Yet this letter includes a playful signature file ending with an exclamation point (hence it was coded "no" for punctuation).

Openings and Closings

The complete set of openings and closings in all 20 letters is presented in the next transparency [transparency #9]. Thirteen persons felt the need for an opening, but they used no less than 11 different openings, which fall naturally into four categories: (1) *formal, traditional ones* ("Dear Ms. Danet" or "Dear Professor Danet"); (2) *forms which try to maintain etiquette while being a bit more informal* ("Greetings"), or use my full name; (3) *informal greetings* ordinarily appropriate to face-to-face and telephone conversation, or personal letters ("hi" or "hello," with or without first name); (4) *no opening*. The letters were spread across all these options. Note that no one combined "hi" or "hello" with "Ms. Danet" or "Professor Danet," as Technosmurf did.

Pre-closings and closings were extremely diverse too. Few people used a closing. However, most used some type of *pre*-closing, ranging from the very formal "I hope to hear from you soon" or "I look forward to your reply" to the informal "Thanks!" or "Regards. Clearly, this is a situation of great variability.

Signature Files

Six letters included a sig file. Two were totally serious and referential, resembling business cards. On the other hand, four were quite playful [transparency #10]. In the first of these, an otherwise entirely serious, well-formed letter, the full name and email address were included on one line, followed by an enigmatically playful saying, "I offer you tea in perfect imperfection!" The second example is a complex typographic composition that not only cites the person's department and institutional affiliation, but presents him as "Guerilla Semiotician," and cites Johan Huizinga's famous book ***Homo Ludens***, with a corrupted version of its subtitle, "Culture as a form of Play." It also includes a Latin saying, ***Cerebrum quaerit, caveat lector***. ***Caveat lector*** is evidently a play on ***Caveat emptor***, "Let the buyer beware." A feasible reading is, "He seeks (needs) a brain, reader beware." There is also some play with typographic symbols, especially in the long line of dashes in the middle.

At least three of these four sig files appeared in letters written by students, people whose professional identity was not formed. In contrast, the examples containing only factual material occurred in letters from established academics. This hints that younger, less established academics may come to use a semi-playful sig file even in the most formal situations, reflecting a new norm that one

can be serious and playful at the same time. It is also possible that as they mature, they will become less playful, though I rather doubt that this will happen.

FROM BUSINESS LETTER TO EXPRESSIVE CONVERSATION

I turn now to my second corpus of letters. I ask: What happens over time to those who attempt initially to conform to the old norms? This question is especially important in a period of technological transition. Might experience with the medium, especially with others using a more informal style, "corrupt" writers, fostering a stylistic change in the direction of increased expressivity and informality? I now analyze a prolonged exchange of messages I had with a software developer whom I have never met in person. Over a period of nine months, from November 1993 to August 1994, I exchanged about 25 messages with the developer of a program for bibliography database management, which I eventually ordered.

Personal Style

In his first letter to me this person mostly maintained a formal style. It contained a salutation, the body of the letter, and his name and affiliation in place of a traditional signature. Syntax, spelling and typography were conventional. There was, however, no closing. His salutation consisted merely of my first name and two dashes, and he signed with his full name preceded by two dashes. The layout of the letter strongly resembled that of a paper letter.

From the start, I adopted a more informal style than did this man. This was particularly evident in the letter in which I ordered the software: as the next transparency shows, I opened with

```
        OK: let's go for it!
```

as if we were chatting, face-to-face [transparency #11].

He too became somewhat more dialogic, when he wrote to say that the

software was on its way to me (same transparency). In this letter he used

exclamation points twice, heightening the emotional tone of his message for the

very first time, and used the colloquial "thanks" instead of the formal "thank you."

The most interesting development of all occurred in late March 1994. I felt

apologetic for not having sent him a check for payment, and several times, had

mentioned the upcoming Passover holiday. I wrote to say that the holiday would

prevent me from obtaining and sending the check along with diskettes for

conversion of my database to his system. Here is his brief reply:

```
Send the disks now, send the check whenever it's
    convenient.
Locusts, frogs, blood, bureaucrats....
```

In several respects, this message [transparency #12] is remarkable. Although

his last name had revealed that he is Jewish, he had never before acknowledged

that we shared a common identity. Now he unexpectedly acknowledged our

common heritage, in surprisingly *poeticized* fashion. This message contains

multiple parallelism-- "the foregrounding of certain aspects of text or discourse by

the introduction of extra regularities, not called for by the basic rules of

language," to cite Geoffrey Leech's definition. The two halves of the first line

contrast "disks" and "check," "now" and the implied "later." The second line can

also be divided into two halves, each of which contain two elements--"locusts,

frogs" vs. "blood, bureaucrats." The dry referentiality of the first line contrasts

sharply with the surprising, poetic/expressive second line.

But what are "locusts" and "frogs" doing in his letter??? In the second line, D.G. conflates material from the **Haggadah**, the text that is read aloud at the traditional Passover Seder, with information about my current situation. The most famous portion of the Seder is the recitation of the Ten Plagues, the ten afflictions that God brought down on the Egyptians for their treatment of the Jews, before their departure for the Promised Land. Locusts, frogs and blood are three of the ten plagues mentioned in the original text, but **they do not appear in the standard order in D.G.'s letter.** Also, bureaucrats are not in the original list of plagues--though they are a plague of modern life! D.G. intuitively changes the order of these three plagues for poetic purposes. Notice also that "blood" and "bureaucrats" both begin with /**b**/, thus introducing alliteration to the expression.

D.G. had come a long way from the quite formal business letter I first received. The poeticized line, "Locusts, frogs, blood, bureaucrats" was not directly inspired by anything in my informal style. Unexpectedly, he later wrote to me on 12 October 1998, having discovered an online version of the chapter in **Cyberpl@y** reporting this research. Only then, I learned that he had received a prize for poetry in college. This case study suggests not that every emailer can become a poet, but that, at least for those that have the talent, the new medium fosters forms of creativity which had been suppressed in the letter-writing tradition of scribal and print culture.

IMPLICATIONS

<u>**Culture vs. Technology**</u>

Although I have argued that the new medium invites informality even in business or official contexts, it would be a great mistake to attribute too much to the effect of technology per se. Rather, I believe that the new technology is strengthening, or converging with, a general cultural trend, which was already in place.

Douglas Biber and Edward Finegan documented "historical drift" in a number of genres of English, including personal and professional letters. Analyzing samples of texts on six dimensions of linguistic variation, they found that over the last three centuries these genres have been moving in an "oral" direction. With respect to letters, their research radically under-estimates the changes. Letters representing the "modern" period in their research were written between 1865 and 1950 (!), and included exemplars from well-known professional authors, which may have biased the results toward a more literary style than was typical of the general public.

Another development was the Plain Language movement, which flourished in the United States and Britain in the late 1970s. This movement called for the reform of legal and bureaucratic language to make it more comprehensible to laypersons. Although language reformers did not expressly set out to make documents more like speech, this was, in fact, the effect of the changes they introduced. In revisions of bureaucratic and legal forms, they preferred active to passive verbs, and verbs with first and second person pronouns instead of

nominalizations. The electronic media are also having an impact. Long years of exposure to films and television have partially re-instated the prominence of speech that characterized oral cultures.

In a review of the history of the teaching of writing in American education, Naomi Baron shows that there have been ideological transformations regarding appropriate subjects for student compositions, the importance of grammatical correctness, and thinking about the extent to which writing is monologue or dialogue. She wrote:

> **Instead of learning a rhetorically based imitation of classical style whose goal was to expound on abstract themes, college students were asked to formulate their own observations of individual daily experiences. While the required medium was writing, the redefined theme opened the door to what would become in the decades that followed the expression of a personal voice. And over time, the expression of that voice, although in writing, came to sound more and more like speech.**

In the light of these trends, it is not surprising to discover that some authors of recent manuals for writers of business letters--paper letters-- encouraged their readers to write in a somewhat more informal style. In short, ***cultural trends have converged with technology to foster a more oral style of letter-writing than in the past, even in business letters.***

"Style Leakage"

One way to interpret the material presented in this lecture is via the concept of "style leakage." Letter writers in both corpora no doubt bring their primary experiences to the task of composition. Thus, younger people, especially students, having grown up in a relatively informal cultural climate in which informal speech patterns had been influencing uses of writing even before computers, and who have had relatively little experience with writing generally,

may therefore use a speech-like style. Older academics, on the other hand, with much experience with the business letter template and style, no doubt bring this experience to their letters. For them, previous experience with the template may take precedence over exposure to an increasingly informal cultural climate. The notion of style leakage suggests that Technosmurf mixed street style, his dominant mode of communication, with a sprinkling of features only poorly internalized from written letter-writing tradition.

Whatever the explanation in his particular case, these thoughts reinforce my argument that the language of email was in a state of turmoil and transition as we approached the millennium. Already today, some norms have no doubt crystallized. My own material suggests, for instance, that it is now acceptable, even in a formal business email letter to a stranger, to use informal openings and closings, or even to omit them in some cases. What will be the fate of syntactic and typographic requirements, as we increasingly use email even for our most important letters? Only time will tell!

I imagine that trends I have documented in this lecture for the English language have their parallels in email in French or Italian or Russian. At the same time, there is, of course, no reason to assume that the outcome of the clash between traditional letter-writing templates and the countervailing constraints of technology and culture will be identical in different cultural contexts. I hope that someone in this group will be stimulated to carry out a comparative analysis of the language of email in different sociolinguistic contexts.

SUGGESTED READING

Baron, Naomi S. 1998. Writing in the Age of Email: The Impact of Ideology versus Technology. *Visible Language* 32 (1):35-53.

Baron, Naomi S. 2000. *Alphabet to Email: How Written English Evolved and Where It's Heading*. New York and London: Routledge.

Biber, Douglas, and Edward Finegan. 1989. Historial Drift in Three English Genres. In *Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches to Linguistic Variation:Georgetown University Roundtable*, edited by T. J. Walsh. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.

Collot, Milena, and Nancy Belmore. 1996. Electronic Language: A New Variety of English. In *Computer-mediated Communication: Social, Linguistic and Cross-cultural Perspectives*, edited by S. C. Herring, pp. 13-28. Philadelphia and Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Crystal, David. 2001. *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Especially chapter 4, "The language of e-mail," pp.94-128.

Danet, Brenda. 1997. Books, Letters, Documents: the Changing Aesthetics of Texts in Late Print Culture. *Journal of Material Culture* 2 (1):5-38. Note: this is the paper about which "Technosmurf" and the other two students wrote to me.

Danet, Brenda. 2001. *Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online*. *"New Technologies, New Cultures"*, series edited by D. Slater. Oxford: Berg Publishers, distributed in the United States by New York University Press. Chapter 2, "'Feeling Spiffy:' the Changing Language of Public Email," pp. 51-99.

Ferrara, Kathleen, Hans Brunner, and Greg Whittemore. 1991. Interactive Written Discourse as an Emergent Register. *Written Communication* 8 (1):8-33.

Kiesler, Sara, Jane Siegel, and Timothy W. McGuire. 1984. Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication. *American Psychologist* 39 (10):1123-1134.

Lee, Judith Yaross. 1996. Charting the Codes of Cyberspace: A Rhetoric of Electronic Mail. In *Communication and Cyberspace: Social Interaction in an Electronic Environment*, edited by L. Strate, R. Jacobson and S. B. Gibson. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Yates, JoAnne. 1989. The Emergence of the Memo as a Managerial Genre. *Management Communication Quarterly* 2:485-510.

Yates, Simeon J. 1996. Oral and Written Linguistic Aspects of Computer-conferencing. In *Computer-mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, edited by S. C. Herring, pp. 29-46. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.