

Communication via email:
Closer to written language or spoken language?

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to define email as either written language or spoken language. Email is an interesting and relatively new form of communication with its characteristics adopted from both written and spoken language. Thus, the main research question is: Are personal emails closer to written language or spoken language? Accompanying the main research question are more specific questions including: Does the age of the sender affect whether an email is more like speech or more like writing?

Emails are analyzed based on relevant written and spoken language criteria. The concentration is on three main parts of emails: greetings, farewells and the message part. In addition, spelling, grammar, and graphical appearance are analyzed, and finally the viewpoint of listeners and readers of language will be accounted for. The data consists of forty emails, from which the conclusions are drawn. The sample is divided into two age groups: GROUP 1 (ages 18-25) and GROUP 2 (ages 50-60), with all of the emails having been sent within the past two years.

In conclusion, different aspects of email can be categorized as writing or speech, and there are differences between the age groups. Greetings in general are closer to written English, although GROUP 1 sample contains more speech-like greetings. Farewells are overall closer to written English. In the message part of the email, the purpose of the email defines whether an email is closer to written or spoken language. With regard to spelling and grammar, GROUP 2 is closer to written language, whereas GROUP 1 is uncertainly in the middle.

Overall, GROUP 2 emails are closer to written language, whereas GROUP 1 emails are in between written and spoken language, in some cases closer to spoken language, though. Email is a reasonably new form of communication, and as the results of the study show, it has already evolved in different directions between different age groups.

Abstrakti suomeksi

Työn tavoitteena on määritellä sähköposti joko kirjoitetuksi tai puhutuksi kieleksi. Sähköposti on mielenkiintoinen ja varsin uusi kommunikaatio muoto, jolla on sekä puhutun että kirjoitetun kielen ominaispiirteitä. Päättökysymys on: Ovatko yksityiset sähköpostit lähempänä kirjoitettua vai puhuttua kieltä? Sen lisäksi on tarkempia kysymyksiä, muun muassa: Vaikuttaako sähköpostin kirjoittajan ikä siihen, että onko sähköposti lähempänä puhetta kuin kirjoitusta?

Sähköpostit analysoitiin kirjoitetun ja puhutun kielen kriteerien valossa. Työssä keskityttiin sähköpostien kolmeen pääpiirteeseen: tervehdyksen, lopetukseen ja itse teksti osaan. Myös sähköpostien oikeinkirjoitusta, kielioppia ja graafista ulkomuotoa analysoitiin, ja lopulta myös kielen lukuiden ja kuulijoiden näkökulmaa tutkittiin. Aineisto koostuu neljästäkymmenestä sähköpostista, joiden tulkintaan saadut vastaukset tukeutuvat. Sähköpostiotos koostuu kaksista eri ikäryhmien sähköposteista: RYHMÄ 1 (18v. - 25v.) ja RYHMÄ 2 (50v. - 60v.), jotka on kaikki lähetetty viimeisen kahden vuoden aikana.

Johtopäätöksinä ovat, että sähköpostien eri osat voidaan jaotella joko puhutuksi tai kirjoitetuksi kieleksi, ja että ikäryhmien välillä oli eroja. Tervehdykset ovat yleisesti ottaen lähempänä kirjoitettua englantia, vaikka ryhmän 1 otos sisältääkin enemmän puhekielen omaisia tervehdyksiä. Lopetukset ovat kokonaisuudessa lähempänä kirjoitettua englantia. Tekstiosassa sähköpostin viestin tarkoitus määrittelee onko sähköpostin kieli lähempänä kirjoitettua vai puhuttua englantia. Ryhmän 2 sähköpostit ovat oikeinkirjoituksen ja kieliopin mukaan lähempänä kirjoitettua kieltä, kun taas ryhmä 1 on kirjoitetun ja puhutun kielen välissä näitä aspekteja tutkiessa.

Yleisesti ottaen RYHMÄ 2 on lähempänä kirjoitettua kieltä, kun taas RYHMÄ 1 on kirjoitetun ja puhutun kielen välissä, kuitenkin jossain tapauksissa lähempänä puhuttua kieltä. Sähköposti on varsin uusi kommunikaation muoto, ja kuten työn tulokset näyttävät, se on jo kehittänyt eri suuntiin eri ikäryhmien välillä.

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1. Introduction

What makes email such an interesting form of communication is its characteristics, which are adopted from both written and spoken language. One might think of an email plainly as a letter transformed into an electric form, but when taking a closer look, it is fairly easy to notice that an email sometimes has more speech-like qualities than those of traditional letter. For example, email is transmitted instantaneously much like a phone call, and is often not written as formally as a letter. It is still in writing, not speech. To define email as either written or spoken language the above-mentioned issues will be analyzed more deeply.

The main research question of this study is: **Are one-to-one personal emails closer to written language or spoken language?** Emails are defined as one-to-one personal emails because there are big differences in the ways email is used in business correspondence, and in advertising, compared to the usage as a form of private communication between two people. The research concentrates solely on personal correspondence, mostly between two people, but sometimes also between two families, the purpose of the emails remaining in personal matters throughout the investigation.

The main research question is followed by more specific questions: **Which aspects make emails more like written language? In which aspects do they resemble speech more closely?** Emails are, of course, expressed through the medium of writing, but they display several core properties of speech. They demand an immediate response unlike letters, which take at least a day to arrive. Emails are transient in a way that they can be immediately deleted. Also, they are often written in a style that is characteristic of face-to-face conversation,¹ for example, the use of smileys compared to facial expressions.

It is important to recognize whether there is a difference in the usage of email between different age groups. The following question is related to that. **Does the age of the person who writes an email affect whether an email is more like spoken language or**

¹ According to Crystal (2001, 29)

written language? Initially, I expect to find adolescents using email more like speech because they are likely to equate email with instant messaging and text messaging, both of which resemble speech.² The older generation, however, is accustomed to sending letters, so they may be inclined to write letter-like emails.

From the academic research done on email and its characteristics, it can be seen that there are certain difficulties in defining email in black-and-white terms as either written or spoken language. Most linguists have reached the conclusion that email is a completely unique form of communication.³ Thus, I am including a research question to suit a situation where no exact answer can be found to the main research question: **If email can't be defined as either written or spoken language, then in which particular contexts is email more like writing or more like speech?**

Since English has established its position as the lingua franca, it is also often used as the global language in emails. Email has enabled easy communication over long distances, and thus increased communication between different countries. Email is especially convenient to multinational companies, when workers in different countries need to be in close correspondence. Also private communication between people of different nationalities happens frequently in English, as it might be the only common language between the people. Because of overall increased communication between people in different countries, a common language has been established, and it most often is English. The growing importance of email as a means to communicate and the English language in email usage, highlight the importance to investigate the language of emails.

It is significant to study emails as a contemporary form of communication in English. By studying emails as a new text type, it can be determined in which direction written language is evolving when it is more and more often written in an electric form. The topic is also worthy of investigation because of the possible applications there would be, if it were to be found out that the younger generation uses email more like speech. This could

² According to Crystal (2001)

³ According to Baron (2000, 248)

be taken into account in teaching, for example, so that at school students would learn the differences in written and spoken language more carefully, and hence be better equipped to write formal emails required in business communication.⁴ Email has been growing in popularity over the past two decades, but it is still a relatively new medium of communication. It is establishing its place in the world of communications.

2. Defining written language and spoken language

The purpose of the study is to explore the question of whether emails are closer to written English or spoken English. The linguistic characterization of speech and writing has long been researched. To begin with, it is important to remember that there is no absolute difference between spoken and written language, and the word “typically” brings out this fact.⁵ To spot the pitfalls of the characterizations in the start, let us take an example of a short note left on a kitchen table and compare it with an academic lecture. In this case the writing is likely to be structurally less complex, more personally involved, and less planned than the academic lecture delivered through the medium of speech. Thus, the characterizations are not to be taken too strictly. Nevertheless, it is crucial to be clear about the factors that differentiate written and spoken language in order to answer the questions regarding to the characterizations of email.

Writing can typically be described as “space-bound, contrived, visually decontextualized, factually communicative, elaborately structured, repeatedly revisable, and graphically rich.”⁶ Besides, writing has been described as less personally involved and less dependent on shared situation in comparison to speech.⁷ Some of the characteristics of writing are fairly obvious: there is always a time-lag between production and reception, and writing is more permanent than speech, thus it is better suited for recording facts. The

⁴ According to Baron (2000, 268)

⁵ According to Crystal and Davy (1969)

⁶ According to Crystal (2001, 28)

⁷ According to Biber (1988, 47)

more debatable questions are whether writing is artificial, and whether it is less personally involved.

Speech is typically described as “time-bound, spontaneous, face-to-face, socially interactive, loosely structured, immediately revisable, and prosodically rich.”⁸ Speech can also be described as informal, contextualized, and event oriented.⁹ As with writing, some aspects of speech are obvious, including such characteristics as socially interactive, and immediately revisable, since a new idea can be immediately uttered to correct a previous one. The more controversial aspects are whether speech is time-bound as it can be recorded, whether it is spontaneous as it can be rehearsed beforehand, and whether it can be generalized to be loosely structured and informal.

All the characteristics relating to either written or spoken language are generalizations, but nonetheless important, in order investigate the linguistic characteristics of email. To shortly describe the position of email in relation to the above characteristics it can be noted that email is expressed through the medium of writing, leaving no question of why email can be said to be written language. The problem arises, however, when noticing that email also possesses several of the characteristics of speech. Emails are time-governed, often expecting immediate responses like speech. They are transient because they can be deleted immediately.¹⁰ Emails can contain smileys, which imitate facial expressions bringing the text closer to speech.

2.1 Methods of investigation

The data consists of forty emails, which come from eight informants. The informant group is divided into two according to their age: **GROUP 1 (ages 18-25)** and **GROUP 2 (ages 50-60)**. There are four people in each of the age groups providing a total of eight people and forty emails.

⁸ According to Crystal (2001, 25-28)

⁹ According to Baron (2000, 21)

¹⁰ According to Crystal (2001, 29)

An email consists of several individually identifiable parts, which can be roughly divided into two. **The header** contains the email address information, the date when the email has been sent, the name of the person who sent it, and a title written by the sender. Since there is a rather small possibility of variation within this information it will be disregarded in the research. The other part is **the body of the email** which is the focus in the study. The body of the email can again be roughly divided into two elements: obligatory and optional. The body must contain a message of some sort, but very often it also has some kind of a greeting and a farewell. Table 1 sums up the elements that will be in focus in this research.

Table 1: Individually identifiable parts of email

The header	The body of the email	
	Obligatory elements	Optional elements
Email address information		
Date of sending the email	Message	Salutation
Name of sender		Farewell
A title		

The salutations and farewells of the emails will be analyzed according to the level of their formality and in comparison to traditional written letters, which are taken to have characteristics of written language. They will also be analyzed according to their informality, and in comparison to phone calls, which are taken to have characteristics of spoken language. Also a lack of a greeting or farewell refers to spoken language, as it makes an email informal and a written letter doesn't lack either of the parts.

When analyzing the message of emails, the focus will be on the spelling, grammar, and graphical appearance. Many spelling and grammar mistakes most likely mean that the writer has not read through the message, but left it unedited, which makes it like spoken language. It is difficult to state, though, how many mistakes make a message more like speech, and how many just indicate carelessness or poor language skills on the part of the writer.

The graphical appearance of the paragraphs will be analyzed on the basis whether there is only a chunk of text (closer to spoken language) or whether there are distinct paragraphs (closer to written language). Smileys, signs of graphical appearance, will also be analyzed. The existence of them is a sign of informality, but the absence of them doesn't indicate anything, since they are not actually a part of written or spoken language, but again a completely unique feature of electronic communication.

2.2 Greetings

It is interesting to investigate to what extent the message part of emails is preceded by a greeting. With greetings it is possible to fairly objectively analyze whether they are more like written language or spoken language. A letter-like greeting resembles written English. The most obvious of these is a greeting beginning with "dear", which will be categorized as written language. More controversial salutations are the ones beginning with "hi" or "hey". According to letter-writing guides the greeting should be "Dear [name of recipient]".¹¹ However, some letter-writing guides approve of the use of "hi", "hey" or "hello" followed by the name of the recipient, besides "dear".¹² Therefore, all of the above are categorized as written English.

The other greetings include the name of the recipient alone, a simple "hey" that could be used in a phone call, and casual greetings, such as, "Hi guys". All of these are categorized as spoken language, as they are very informal, and could not be used in traditional letters. The other group categorized as speech is greetingless messages. They are often promptly sent responses to emails sent between people who know each other.

In Tables 2 and 3 GROUP 1 and GROUP 2 are contrasted with respect to the use of a greeting. Table 2 contains the greetings from GROUP 1 (ages 18-25) and beside it Table 3 contains the greetings from GROUP 2 (ages 50-60). Following each of the salutations, there is an x indicating whether it resembles spoken or written English.

¹¹ According to Library Online (<http://www.libraryonline.com/default.asp?pid=46>)

¹² According to Letter Writing guide (<http://www.letterwritingguide.com/friendlyletterformat.htm>)

Table 2: GROUP 1

Greeting	Spoken	Written
Hi guys:	x	
SO, I went to the Pyramids today.	x	
I'm not totally sure how,	x	
salaam alikum (I think that means hello)		x
Hi Suvi,		x
Suvi!	x	
SUVI!!!!	x	
SUVI!!!	x	
Finally, The week is over.	x	
So tomorrow i'm	x	
Hey Suvi,		x
Hey Suvi,		x
Hey Suvi,		x
Hey Suvi,		x
Hey Suvi,		x
Dear Liisa,		x
:D Hey Liisa.		x
Oh wow!	x	
Sounds great. :P	x	
Hey!	x	
Total number of spoken/written greetings:	11	9

Table 3: GROUP 2

Greeting	Spoken	Written
Hi Matti, Tiina, Suvi and Arto,		x
Hi Auli and Suvi,		x
Hi Suvi,		x
Hi Suvi,		x
It all looks great!	x	
We normally put...	x	
A sauna and cool weather sounds nice right now.	x	
Dear Matti and Auli,		x
Dear Suvi, Auli, and Matti,		x
Dear Suvi,		x
Dear Matti,		x
Dear Matti,		x
Dear Matti,		x
Palmer House is a really nice hotel,	x	
Guten Abend (your time) Dear Matti!		x
Thanks Petri	x	
Hi Petri		x
You will be...	x	
1 change in host	x	
Hello Petri:		x
Total number of spoken/written greetings:	7	13

Overall there are more greetings that resemble written language than there are greetings resembling spoken language. As can be seen from Tables 2 and 3 there are 22 (9+13= 22) greetings which resemble written language compared to 18 (11+7= 18) greetings which resemble spoken language. It can be concluded that traditional letter-like salutations are more often used than the informal speech-like salutations or a lack of salutation. Therefore, greetings in emails can be categorized as closer to written language.

GROUP 1 uses speech-like greetings more often than written ones; 11 spoken compared to 9 written. They also use smileys, and more exclamation marks, and capital letters than GROUP 2. The reason for this could be that they haven't written many traditional letters, but instead have started using email, instant messaging, chat groups and text messaging at an early age. Thus, they are not bounded by the rules of writing letters, but instead are used to informal written language in electric form. They seem to use expressions which bring the text closer to speech, as they try to convey the tone of the voice, rhythm, loudness and pitch,¹³ as well as, facial expressions in the form of smileys.

GROUP 2 in contrast uses greetings that are used in traditional letters. For example, six of them begin the email with "dear..." compared to one in GROUP 1. GROUP 2 is more used to traditional letters, than instant messaging, chat groups or text messaging, which GROUP 1 has grown up with. Thus, they use salutations familiar to them, which is either "dear" or the less formal "hi". However, they send emails which lack a salutation completely, similar to GROUP 1, the younger age group. This feature is unique to email because letters and phone calls alike usually have a salutation of some sort.

2.3 Farewells

Farewells are usually composed of two parts, which are a pre-closing formula and identification.¹⁴ The use of pre-closing formula is most dependent on the relationship between the two people, and to what they are accustomed to using. Since pre-closing formulae are

¹³ According to Crystal (2001, 34)

¹⁴ According to Crystal (2001, 107)

not used in speech at all, and in written mediums they are more dependent on personal factors than linguistic ones, they are difficult to identify as either written or spoken language. To summarize the findings on farewells, several things can be concluded. The vast majority of the emails have a farewell, only one lacks it completely. Over half of the emails have “Love, [name]” as a farewell. Many of them also include something like “See you soon” or “Take care”. Some have a more formal farewell, such as, “All the best” or “Best, [name]”. These are mostly in accordance with traditional letter writing guides.¹⁵ Since the majority of farewells in emails resemble written language they can be categorized as more like writing than speech.

2.4 Message part of the email

Message is the main element in an email. It is obligatory, since it is the reason for sending the email, whereas greeting and farewell are there only to accompany the message. There are different kinds of messages mostly depending on the purpose of the email. Emails can be written to keep in touch with people you don't often see. These emails would be best defined as letters in an electronic form. They contain most of the core properties of a letter, but just because of convenience: avoiding the time lag, not having to go to a mail box and buy a stamp, they are sent electronically.

The other main group includes short notes, which often only have the message part, and perhaps a farewell, and are written in a hurry. They are used to keep people posted of your current whereabouts, agree on meeting times or ask quick questions. These emails are more like phone calls. And indeed, the reason why email is used instead of a phone call is convenience. Globalization has had an effect on the use of emails. When people live in different parts of the country or the world, a phone call can be expensive whereas email is free, and the problem of time difference is avoided since the corresponding people don't have to be there at the same time.

¹⁵ According to Library Online (<http://www.libraryonline.com/default.asp?pID=46>)

2.5 Spelling and grammar

When the email samples were analyzed, it became apparent that most of the emails from GROUP 2 do not contain spelling or grammar errors. There are very few, such as “Giv eme some ideas!” which contains only a small spelling error. In the case of GROUP 1 there are more. The younger generation does not seem to be very concerned about the use of correct language. Their errors include: “dont”, “Thats” and “Hes”, which are missing apostrophes. There are also missing letters like “out of th sand.” Based on that, it can be concluded that GROUP 2 regards email like other written language, and is therefore more careful with the correct spelling etc. GROUP 1 is somewhere in the middle writing language that is mostly correct, but ignoring some spellings conventions in order to save time.

2.6 Graphical appearance

The graphical appearance of an email is also good to take into consideration when trying to label it either as written or as spoken language. It is traditional for letters to have distinct paragraphs. In comparison, unbroken text mostly resembles speech. The data shows that about half of the emails in GROUP 1 lack paragraph division. At least it is not as neatly done as in the emails of GROUP 2, which all (excluding the short note-like emails) have orderly letter-like paragraphs. Based on this it can be concluded that GROUP 1, once again, uses email a little more like speech, while the older adults write emails in a way traditional letters are written.

Smileys are a unique feature of electronic communication, and they haven't been around for very long. This is why my initial prediction was that they are only used by the younger adults. This hypothesis was supported by the data: only GROUP 1 emails include smileys, but even they don't use them much. Perhaps if I had had even younger subjects, such as, 10-15 year-olds, there might have been a greater use of smileys. The smileys that were used were, for example, “=)” (smiling), and “:D” (laughing). They imitate facial

expressions and are not used in any traditional written English. Thus, they indicate that the emails from GROUP 1 are also in this aspect closer to speech than the GROUP 2 emails.

2.7 Another viewpoint: listeners and readers of language

Another viewpoint to differentiate speech and writing is to consider the special needs of readers and listeners. Quick understanding and adequate response is often demanded from a listener. Readers are under less pressure to understand immediately what is said and to respond actively.¹⁶ In the case of emails quick understanding isn't usually required. Even if an email demands immediate response, the one who's reading it has time to reread some parts, if they were difficult to comprehend on the first time, and also check some words from a dictionary if needed. An email often demands an adequate response, however, and many times a quick one, too. Again email is left uncertainly in the middle. It is not as fast paced as face-to-face conversation, and there is the opportunity to reread parts, but it often requires a quick response.

3. Conclusion

As predicted, email can't be thought in black and white terms as either written language or spoken language. Even after a substantial inspection on the nature of email, it can be seen that email possesses both qualities. Certain parts of email can be identified as either writing or speech, though. There were notable differences between the age groups on whether an email is closer to written language or spoken language. All the findings of the study are summed up below.

Greetings in general are closer to written English. GROUP 1 sample contains more speech-like greetings than GROUP 2 sample, bringing out the difference between the age groups. **Farewells** are overall closer to written English. In **the message part** of the email

¹⁶ According to Hughes (1996, 8-9)

the purpose of the email, rather than the age of the sender, defines whether an email is closer to written or spoken language. Longer emails resembling traditional letters are closer to writing, whereas often greetingless short emails are closer to speech.

In the matter of **spelling and grammar**, GROUP 2 was more careful with the correct spelling indicating that their emails are closer to written language. GROUP 1 was somewhere in the middle in respect to spelling and grammar. They do not always use capital letters or apostrophes when they should, but the text still effectively conveys the message. GROUP 1 is also the only one to use smileys, which are categorized as belonging to speech-like characteristics. From all this it can be concluded that **GROUP 2 uses email more in a written form of language**, whereas **GROUP 1 is somewhere in between, leaning towards spoken language** in some cases.

3.1 Future of email

Email usage has been increasing greatly since 1993, when the large network service providers started connecting email systems to the Internet.¹⁷ From the research it can be concluded that the older adults, who came in contact with email at an age, when they had already used many other forms of communication, started writing emails resembling traditional letters. They seem to regard emails as electronic mail, where the word originally comes from.¹⁸

The younger generation who started using email around the same time as instant messaging and text messaging seem to think of email as more a cross between written and spoken language. They concentrate more on delivering the message quickly, and are not bounded by the strict letter-writing formats. The adolescents use more abbreviations, and also the emotion conveying smileys. In these aspects email can be compared to text-messaging, which has raised concerns of teachers because of the improper language used by the youth. In a recent Newsweek article David Crystal commented on this subject

¹⁷ According to Stewart (<http://www.livinginternet.com/e/ei.htm>)

¹⁸ According to Online Etymology Dictionary (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=mail>)

saying that “texting seems to give literacy a boost.”¹⁹ From this it can be concluded that since the same kind of language is used in emails, it doesn’t affect the youth’s language skills in a malignant way.

Email is a reasonably new form of communication, and as can be seen from the results of the study, it has already evolved in different directions between different age groups. It may continue to evolve in different directions in regards to the age of the sender. An alternative is that since email is used so globally, a global standard of email could start to develop. Email has - to some extent - replaced phone calls and letters, but it has also created communication that would not have taken place otherwise. With its ways of expression including both spoken and written language, email has generated an exchange of ideas and information between people that would not have happened without it.

¹⁹ According to Huang (2008)

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