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## CORPORATE COMMUNICATION: WHAT IS IT DOING IN LANGUAGE FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES?

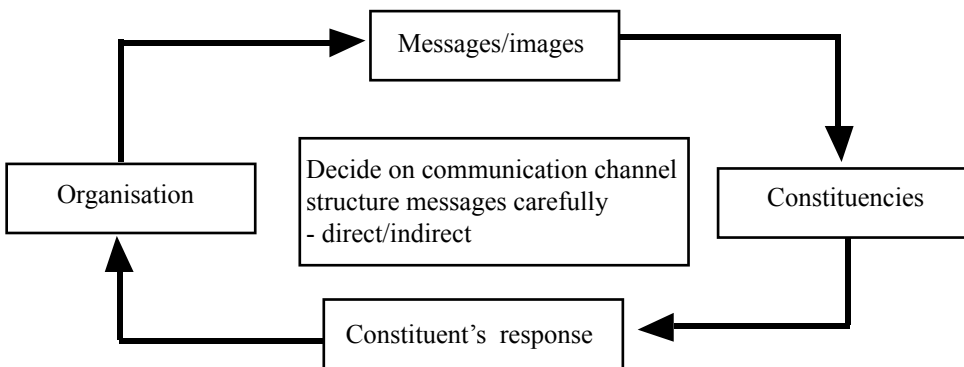
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### INTRODUCTION

Nickerson (1998) says,

One way forward for Business English research is not to consider language as separate from the corporate environment within which it is used, but rather as an intrinsic part of that environment. (pp. 281-294)

The above statement says a lot about the relationship between language and corporate environment. The specific language used for a specific environment requires a careful analysis of the discourse community in terms of what are the norms, conventions and purposes of the speech events in that particular discourse. Thus, communication is one aspect that needs to be looked at to understand what is going on in the organization.



**Figure 1:** Expanded corporate communication strategy model  
(Argenti 1998:43)

In explaining the notion of communication, Argenti (1998) draws the explanation to the work of Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric* (1975) and the work of Munter (1997). Aristotle (1975) defines the components of speech as: “Every speech is composed of three parts: the speaker, the subject of which he treats, and the person to whom it is addressed ... to whom the end or the object of the speech refers” (p.32). The three part-system has been applied to all communication, written or oral by modern communication expert, Professor Mary Munter in her *Guide to Managerial Communication* (1997). She extended Aristotle’s notion of “the speaker” to “the communicator” to include either writer or speaker, and “hearer” to “audience” to include both readers and listeners. In addition, Munter also added the notion of “channel choice” and cultural context as other important considerations in today’s business communication.

Argenti (1998) uses the same components of speech as described by Aristotle, to describe a sound communication strategy that includes the organisation, the constituents, and the messages or images. The model is circular to indicate the communication as an ongoing process rather than a system with a beginning and an end.

*So, what is corporate communication?*

There has been no precise definition of corporate communication since the focus is on the aspects of communication activity planned and managed by corporations. This includes all communications within and outside the organisations.

Following Hutchinson & Waters’s (1987) explanation of the growth of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the field of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) could be said to have emerged from the expansion of demand for language to suit particular needs, developments and advancement in all areas of life and work. For

example, the advent of technology has resulted in an increase in the use of computer and computer related facilities in everyday lives. The need for faster and speedier transmission of information boosts the importance of computer application in almost all aspects of lives.

The application of computer in almost all aspects of lives brings with it the emergence of cyber society which refers to computer users all over the world who are electronically linked. These users formed a large community and their communication is characterized by a hybrid of written and spoken communication that is known as electronic discourse or e-discourse, in short.

In the Malaysian context, a few researches were conducted to investigate the impact of technology on communication specifically the use of electronic mail (email) communication in organisations. Alsree (1997) looks at power and empowerment through the use of email. Le Vasan (1996) studies the impact of technology in the communication of members of an organisation, focusing on email. The findings of the two studies highlighted the importance of email as one of the communication mediums in organisations.

Communication is closely related to community and culture (Widdowson, 1998). It will be difficult for communication to take place if people do not share a communal view, a common culture and the linguistic categorisation inherent in the culture/system.

Any text produced is designed to be accessible to, and acceptable to a like-minded reader. Widdowson (1998) explains that if a reader can identify himself/herself with the text, then he/she can confirm his/her common values and ratify the role as insider. The text is then authenticated as a discourse which is expressive of a particular community that he/she belongs. Widdowson further adds that communication implies community in which the membership is mediated with the meaning of the text. It is not just a matter of knowing the semantic meanings of the words because the words are schematically connected to form conceptualisations of reality which

define the culture of a particular discourse community (Swales 1990).

Communication is not simply a matter of issuing semantic tokens of fixed meaning but of using the resources of the language code indexically, to indicate shared schematic knowledge of ideational patterns of conceptualization and interpersonal patterns of communication, shared assumptions, beliefs, values, conventions of behaviour, that is to say aspects of a common culture which define particular discourse communities.

Borrowing Widdowson's (1998) word, "Communicative efficiency" refers to the economy of language used when communicating with people who shared the same culture, having common ground for co-operation. The extensive work in the field of ESP on genre analysis by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) has contributed significantly to the furtherance of the "communicative efficiency". The analysis seeks to identify the particular conventions for language use in certain domains of professional and occupational activity. It is a development and improvement on register analysis since it deals with not just text but discourse. Genre analysis seeks to reveal beyond just what linguistic forms are manifested in the discourse but how they realise, make real, the conceptual and rhetorical structures, modes of thought and action, which are established as conventional for certain discourse communities.

Widdowson (1998) asserts that this generic view of ESP leads to a recognition that the language is regulated by the requirements of the profession, and as the requirements change, the language will change accordingly. The implication of this is that the purposes of language for professional and occupational purposes will change as the professions and occupations change. Hence, the development in communications alters communication in the sense that medium has an effect on mode. For example, technological advances have led to different modes of language use resulting in different genres. Thus, the rapid development in electronic communications will

have radical effects on the way people conduct their communicative affairs. Widdowson (1998) stresses that therefore, this factor needs to be taken into consideration in ESP teaching, that it would be counterproductive to instruct students in outdated generic conventions. He advises that it would be wise to present such genres as more general points of reference with possibility for modification and not as specific norms to be conformed to.

*How to guide students to authenticate the actually occurring language by a process of gradual initiation into the conventions of communication accepted in the discourse community for which the students are bidding for membership?*

## **CORPORATE COMMUNICATION**

Corporate communication is the newest and the least understood discipline, according to Argenti (1998). It is the only one of the four disciplines that is specifically related to a functional area within organisations. The other three disciplines are management communication, business communication, and organisational communication.

Argenti (1998) explains the development in the area of corporate communication. The field of corporate communication has evolved from schools of communication and journalism - under the area known as public relations or public affairs. It evolved from schools of communication since the schools train practitioners for a career in public relations outside the boundaries of journalism. Historically, people who worked in the area known as corporate communication today, came out of a journalism background because most of what the practitioners did was related to media. Then, business schools began to focus on corporate communication as a subset of management communication.

Management communication focuses on communication strategy; skills, including writing and speaking; process, including

teamwork and interpersonal behaviour; the global environment, which focuses on cross- cultural communication; and function, which gets the connection with corporate communication (Argenti, 1998).

The 1990s have shown a growing interest in the role of corporate culture and the different types of corporate document produced with the advent of technology. Previous researches have looked at the corporate context in general and the production of corporate documents via various media. Nickerson (1998) reports that the researches include Rogers and Swales (1990) and Swales and Rogers (1995), among others. Driskill (1989) looks at the importance of taking corporate culture into consideration. She is of the opinion that corporate culture needs to be included in the models of communication “not because it plays a uniform role in all corporate communication, but because it accounts for a complex of interdependent factors whose configuration affects what people say, write and read” (p.137-138).

## **ELECTRONIC MAIL (EMAIL) COMMUNICATION**

Electronic mail (email) communication has been adopted widely by organisations worldwide. Its features that include speedy transmission of information, easy storage and retrieval of messages and ability to reach multiple recipients at one time have boost its popularity especially for organisations that are trying to communicate /reach their customers globally.

Its speedy transmission of information and the absence of face-to-face encounter have influenced the way messages are written. In email communication, the language use shows a tendency towards spoken communication and it is more informal.

Previous researches on email support the findings that email resembles spoken communication even though it is a written medium. Rice's (1997) study of four organisations found that writers combined elements of formal and informal discourse with preference for simple coordinate patterns, brief paragraph and the use of active verbs. Gains's (1999) simple statistics analysis revealed that for certain types of message, writers use the medium in a creative and conversational way sometimes. This might be different from the previously identified genres of communication. In analysing more than one hundred email letters, Uhrilova (1996) found that even though the very substance of email is written, there are features in the messages that are not typical of written texts. Besides, Gimenez (2000) reveals that electronically mediated communication is already affecting business written communication, showing a tendency towards a more flexible register.

*What is the significance of the above findings to the teaching and learning especially in the field of Language for Specific Purposes?*

Language for Specific Purposes is targeted towards meeting the needs of customers and to know the needs, the supplier or the service provider should find out about the needs of the customers. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a mini survey has been conducted to gauge the communication preference of selected organisations in Malaysia (Hadina, 1999). The survey reveals that email is the preferred medium for both internal and external communication and the languages used when communicating through email are English and Bahasa Malaysia (BM), depending on who the person is interacting with. The rest of the findings are summarised below:



Factors for using email	Reasons for using email
Influence of technology	To portray the company's good image
	To reflect the technological culture the company is adopting
Features of email	Messages could be forwarded to multiple receivers at the same time
	Senders do not have to meet face-to-face with the persons they are interacting
	It resembles spoken communication more than written communication
Attitudes of users	Writers feel more relaxed writing email than memos or letters
	Writers respond to email faster compared to memos and letters
	Writers follow no specific format when writing email

**Table 1:** Reasons for using email in organizations

As more and more organisations are adopting/opting for computer-mediated communication (CMC), research on the use of such computer technology should be conducted. This is due to the fact that the medium affects language and the effects on language should be looked into in order to find out what really happens in the real world. The findings will be able to inform language teachers and trainers, of the communication behaviour of people in a specific discourse community.

Electronic mail has been one of the mediums that is gaining significance in organisational communication. Therefore, students should be made aware that when using email, other factors come into play and those factors shape the communication behaviour of members of organizations. The factors are role relationship, corporate culture, and context of situation, among others.

## ANALYSIS

### Company B PRN

Fourteen messages were analysed over a period of two months from one informant. The functions of email messages mostly written are to inform(64.3%) while request, inquire, request/inquire, order and to call for meeting represents 7.14% of the functions written. The formats of the messages that could be observed vary from memo format to the letter format or just a one to a few sentences message. The choice of those formats depends on the content of the message, that is, formal or informal, and the recipient, for example, peer, subordinate or superior. As evident in email messages of other companies, short forms are used quite a lot. The words that are mostly used in short forms are “TQ” (thank you), “pls” (please), “aslmkm”(“assalamualaikum” - a greeting in Arabic), “s’tera” (“sejahtera” - a greeting in Bahasa Malaysia or BM), “dr” (“dari” - from in BM). English language is used as the official language for email communication. Salutation is used when communicating with peers and close associates while a general announcement does not have any salutation. Some messages only carry initials or names of the recipient without salutation at the beginning of the messages.

It was observed in the messages that the writers of email messages in this company used bold letters, change of font size or underline the words to emphasize points. However, if all capital letters are used, there is no significance to the importance of the messages because that only means that the keyboard function has not been changed. In emphasising the importance of a point, repeated reminder will be given and the language use is direct and authoritative. Collective noun is used to indicate common goal or purpose.

### ***Address form***

Out of the fourteen messages, only five messages started with the salutation “Dear” and four of these refer to everyone in the division (Dear all). The other one message, “Dear CK” is written by a colleague from another division to the informant. The message is written as a response to the earlier teleconversation. This small sample shows that salutation ‘Dear’ is not commonly used for intra-division messages except for general announcement to everybody in the division. The practice is to start the message straightaway or use initial before the messages without salutation.

### ***Pronoun used***

The pronoun ‘We’ is used to reflect collective action of an individual. The most instances of ‘we’ are found in an external communication from a vendor. The writer uses ‘we’ to indicate the company’s commitment to its customers. In another instance, the pronoun ‘we’ is used in internal communication to indicate the specific division’s responsibility and commitment in carrying out their duties.

The pronoun ‘I’ is used in the messages by the writers who have specific responsibility or authority to do something in the course of duty. In other words, ‘I’ carries an important weight as it indicates or implies that the person is in authority to carry out a specific task.

### ***Modals***

‘Will’ occurs sixteen times in the messages and in twelve instances, ‘will’ collocates with ‘be’. In another four instances, the modal ‘will’ represents intent to do something in the future.

## **Company A - PSB**

A total of twenty-four messages were analysed over a period of three months. Two informants forwarded the email messages. The functions of email messages that could be observed are to inform (29.1%), explain (20.8%), request (16.6%) and call for meeting (8.3%). Other functions that could be observed include inform/inquire, confirm/inquire, explain/suggest, inform/order and acknowledgement. An analysis of the messages reveals that nicknames are used in some of the messages where the writer knows the recipient of the mails e.g. Bum. Some messages start with salutations such as “Dear” while other messages go straight to the content. In some of the messages without salutation, initials are used e.g. En. AA. The use of short form is also popular in this company. Among the words mostly used with short forms are gentlemen (g/men), regards (rgds), “Assalamualaikum”- a greeting in Arabic (“Aslmkm”). Some messages do not have sign-off while some adopt a full-name sign-off.

### ***Address form***

The salutation ‘Dear’ is used sparingly in this company. Only nine messages used the salutation ‘Dear’ from twenty-four messages analysed. The messages that start with ‘Dear’ include B1 and B2 - an external correspondence sent by a training provider, C2 and C3 - a one way message to inform receivers about a new procedure in the company, DI - a request by a colleague from a different department, E1 and E2 - a correspondence between two colleagues about an update to the system which has not taken place yet, A3 - a request for the receivers to confirm their attendance to a meeting that has been informed earlier, and F1 - an explanation about a procedure to be followed in the department.

A3 and F1 messages adopt “Dear L&G” which stands for “Ladies & Gentlemen”. Both messages are general in the sense that they are explanation and request for the receivers to take action. The other messages adopt the initials of the receivers after the salutation ‘Dear’.

### ***Pronoun used***

F4 is a correspondence between Co. B and a contractor for KITB project and this message highlights an interesting alternative use of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘We’. The most instances of ‘I’ and ‘We’ are found in this message. The writer used ‘We’ when referring to the project to indicate that the project is a collaboration between Co. B and the contractor. The writer highlighted a concern about the running of the project and suggested a few measures to improve the situation. When giving the suggestions, the writer switched to ‘I’, indicating that the suggestions are his. The second instance in which ‘We’ is used a lot is found in F1 - a message sent to a few people in the division, explaining about certain procedures to be followed. Since the correspondence is related to a common practice in the division, ‘We’ represents a collective action of the division.

The second most occurrence of the pronoun ‘I’ is found in G1. The writer used ‘I’ to explain the actions he has taken since it is his responsibility to oversee the project. Other instances of the pronoun ‘I’ are found in messages where the writers explain or inform their actions in response to specific queries or procedures. Consequently, other instances of ‘We’ are found in messages that explain or inform any new procedures or changes to the present system to indicate the collective action of the company.

### **Modals**

The most frequently used modal is ‘Will’ with 17.6% occurring in A1 and A4. Both messages were written to inform receivers about the formation of a sub-committee and following that, to call for a meeting to discuss the supposed formation. Hence, both occurrences of ‘Will’ represent intentions to do something in the future.

<b>Company A (PSB)</b>	<b>Company B (PRN)</b>
<p><b>Set A</b></p> <p><b>Message 1</b></p> <p>Subject: LOA approving procedures</p> <p>NNE, Please update me on this</p> <p><b>Message 2</b></p> <p>Subject: Re: LOA approving procedures B, XYZ procedures fall under which procedures in LOA?</p>	<p><b>Set A</b></p> <p>Subject: Sub-committee meeting</p> <p>Please to inform the above meeting as follows: Date/time/venue Agenda: sales result, sales plan sales order confirmation Main committee meeting is to be confirmed later Your attendance is highly appreciated Thank you Wywd</p>

<p><b>Set B</b></p> <p>Subject: Co. P/Q Interface – Task Allocations Internal Discussion</p> <p>Assalamualaikum and good day, Gentlemen,</p> <p>You're invited for the above session which shall be convened as follows: Date/time/venue</p> <p>The agenda are as per my personal discussion with most of you during this week</p> <p>Rgds,</p> <p>KAB</p>	<p><b>Set B</b></p> <p>Subject: FW: Sub-committee meeting</p> <p>Dear all ...</p> <p>Please complete the sales summary by Tuesday and forward to the respective departments.</p> <p>Mr. A, ... could you please attend the meeting on behalf of finance since I on half day leave (pm) tomorrow. Thank you.</p>
<p><b>Set C</b></p> <p>Subject: PSB Induction Programme</p> <p>BRAVO!!! At least we should feel proud of our work ... that we have a comprehensive induction programme in place ... probably the Best induction programme in PSB</p>	<p><b>Set C</b></p> <p>Subject: PRN Demo</p> <p>Hi AMK,</p> <p>This is a recap of our conversation on Tuesday. Pls get back to me if you have any questions.</p>

**Table 2:** Samples of email messages

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented an exploratory attempt towards an interdisciplinary approach to research in the field of language and the corporate world. The study is not exhaustive and neither complete. Rather, it provides an insight into the corporate world and the role of language within it. The findings would be able to inform language teachers, ESP trainers, material planners and course designers about the language used at work in the wake of computer-mediated communication facility. Quoting St John (1996: 15), “there is a definite need to understand ... the ways in which language and business strategies interact”.

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