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David Banks

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Academic mediation: the functions of an electronic discussion list

David Banks

Introduction

- 1 Over the past decade computer-mediated communication has developed at an amazing rate. From being a means of communication for a fairly restricted minority, often with at least scientific, if not computer, competence, it has become a standard, daily way of contacting others for vast numbers of people in the developed, and increasingly even in the developing, world. It is therefore the latest member of a long lineage, of which the oldest member is the letter, but to which the twentieth century has added the telephone, telex and fax. As such it constitutes a new sub-genre with its own peculiarities of register. As Uhlířová says “The choice of medium influences the choice in grammar itself” (1994: 277), though the newness of this sub-genre may mean that its register features are still in the process of elaboration, and thus present us with an, as yet, unstable situation.
- 2 Since the development of this type of discourse is so recent, there is not yet a large amount of literature on the subject. Of the studies that do exist, many deal with individual to individual e-mail messages, in the sense that they are from a single address to a single address. Uhlířová's (1994) study is of this type. Her corpus consists of over 100 academic e-mails, most of which are in English, though not necessarily by English-speakers. Among the features she notices is a tendency to use e-mails to indicate messages in a different medium, for example, announcing a letter that has been posted. She also says that the e-mails are related to information or action, but never entertainment. These would appear to be features that have disappeared in the intervening half a dozen years or so. She also, like many other analysts, comments on the informality and speech-like nature of this mode of discourse.

Even a very ‘official’ e-mail letter makes an impression that is not so official as e.g. an official letter written on a paper with a heading. It always has a flavour of informality ... (Uhlířová 1994: 276)

Although *written* in its substance, e-mail messages are in some respects no less interactive than speech [...] (Uhlířová 1994: 280)

- 3 Gains (1999) studies a corpus of 62 commercial and 54 academic e-mails. According to his analysis the main functions are to initiate or respond to information, requests, and directives. The directives are restricted to the commercial part of his corpus; none occur in the academic e-mails. Of the 54 academic e-mails in his corpus, 22 initiate information and 17 respond to requests. He also studies such features as openings and closings, the topic of the messages and conversational features. On this final point he says of the academic writers

In contrast to the data from the commercial source [...] the writers do not seem to perceive the medium of electronic mail as a particularly permanent form of communication. Rather it frequently appears to be used as a short-term medium for pseudo-conversational interaction [...] (Gains 1999: 95)

- 4 Gimenez (2000) studies a corpus of 63 business e-mails. He claims that on a cline of formality, these are more formal than personal e-mails, and that academic e-mails fall somewhere between, being more formal than personal, but less formal than commercial e-mails. He too remarks on the speech-like features of this genre.

E-mail as a mode of communication can be said to have derived from telephone communication and as such it resembles the features of spoken rather than written language. (2000: 238)

- 5 It must however be noted that in some cases, remarks on speech-like features may be related to the fact that some studies are based on messages that are composed on line in real time. This leads to messages that cannot be edited or corrected before being delivered. This is notably the case of Collot & Belmore (1996), who study computer conferencing, as well as Werry (1996) and Condon & Cech (1996), who also study synchronous systems.

Nor can they be considered strictly written since many of them are composed directly on-line, thereby ruling out the uses of planning and editing strategies which are at the disposal of even the most informal writer. (Collot & Belmore 1996: 14)

- 6 Yates (1996) with a similar type of corpus discovered some written and some oral characteristics.
- 7 Herring (1996) carries out a feminist oriented study on a corpus of two extended discussions from two separate discussion lists, LINGUIST and WMST, the latter being a list dealing with women's studies. She claims that whereas women tend to agree and have a supportive attitude to others, men tend to oppose and criticise. Korenman & Wyatt (1996), also basing their study on the WMST list, found a strong impression of conversation.
- 8 Gruber, in a series of three articles (1997, 1998, 2000), uses a corpus based on the LINGUIST and ETHNO discussion lists. In the first two he studies a corpus of extended discussion comprised of 51 messages from the LINGUIST list and 30 from ETHNO. In Gruber 1997 he studies features such as the type/token ratio, numbers of words per clause, and attempts to establish where these messages stand on the written/spoken cline.

[...] scholarly e-mail discussions form a single genre which can be characterized by features of academic letter writing and scholarly papers as well as oral communication. (Gruber 1997: 38)

- 9 Gruber (1998) considers ways of introducing and continuing new topics. The third article in this series (2000) uses a sample of 7 messages from the LINGUIST list and 5 from ETHNO, and compares these with the discussion sections of the journal *Discourse and Society* (6 extracts), the literature review sections of articles from *Language and Society* (6 extracts), and book reviews from *Discourse and Society* (5 texts). He studies the thematic structure of these texts and finds that while all of these genres have complex topical themes, the e-mails are distinguished by extensive use of textual themes. He concludes that
- [...] scholarly e-mail communication is [...] much more 'egalitarian' and 'spontaneous' than printed academic communication. (2000: 86)
- 10 It will be noted that the question of the so-called speech-like nature of e-mail messages is one that crops up in a large number of the discussions on this type of genre. I think that Miller (1999) may be closer to the mark in claiming that the degree of planning which goes into the creation of a text is the crucial parameter from this point of view.
- [...] a basic property of texts is the extent to which they are planned. Texts produced with little planning time, whether e-mail messages or conversation, have relatively simple syntax and a reduced range of lexical items; [...] (Miller 1999: 9)
- 11 This relates to Halliday's (1989) contention that the written equivalent of speech would be the various drafts of a text which show all the crossings-out, alterations, deletions, additions, and other evidence of the writer changing his mind as he produces the text. From this point of view it is evident that there is a basic difference between e-mail messages produced on a synchronous system, where editing and correction are impossible, and those produced on an asynchronous system, where the writer only sends his message after he has edited and corrected it to his own satisfaction. The former is obviously much more likely to contain features which will be perceived as being 'speech-like' than the latter.
- 12 In this study, I shall consider a small corpus of messages posted on an asynochrous academic discussion list. I shall attempt to describe the register of the corpus using the systemic functional model, and hence in terms of Field, Tenor and Mode. Within Field, I shall consider the communicative functions which the list serves; within Tenor, I shall consider the illocutionary acts which it realises, and in terms of Mode, I shall consider to what extent it relates to other genres, particularly letters.

Corpus

- 13 The corpus consists of all messages posted on the discussion list *sysfling* during the two-month period November-December 2000. *Sysfling* is a list for those interested in the linguistic model known as Systemic Functional Linguistics. Those who subscribe to it are typically academic linguists ranging from doctoral students to established linguists with international reputations. During the period in question, 43 messages were posted on the list, 29 during the month of November, and 14 in December. The fact that there were considerably fewer during the latter month is probably an indication of academic activity winding down as Christmas approaches! All the messages in the corpus are in English, though not necessarily by native speakers.

Register

- 14 Within the systemic functional model register is analysed in terms of Field, Tenor, and Mode. These are the three variables of the situation of context (Halliday 1979, Halliday & Hasan 1989, Halliday & Matthiessen 1999, Martin 1992, Eggins 1994, Thompson 1996). Field deals with what is being communicated; it relates to the subject matter of the communication. Tenor concerns the relationships between those involved in the act of communication. Mode relates to how language functions in communication, thus the basic dichotomy concerned is that between written and spoken language, and the many possible combinations of these two. Thus, to take a simple example, suppose we are dealing with the text constituted by the regulations for the game of rugby. The Field is the conduct of the game in all its ramifications, notably the rules necessary for the game to be played in a suitable and equitable manner. The Tenor is that of the governing body of the sport communicating with the officials and players who are involved in the game. The Mode is written language intended to be read silently, though it should be noticed that read here must be understood as read for reference purposes, not read linearly from beginning to end, which would be the case with literary genres, for example.
- 15 These three variables of the situation of context are related to, and realised by the three semantic metafunctions, experiential, interpersonal, and textual.

Table 1. Adapted from Halliday & Hasan (1989: 26)

SITUATION Feature of context	(realised by)	TEXT Functional component of semantic system
Field of discourse (what is going on)	→	Experiential meanings (transitivity, naming, etc.)
Tenor of discourse (who is taking part)	→	Interpersonal meanings (mood, modality, person, etc.)
Mode of discourse (role assigned to language)	→	Textual meanings (theme, information, cohesive relations)

Field

- 16 In terms of Field, I wish to consider the functions which the list serves. There are six messages which give information about publications of one sort or another. Three of these concern journals and provide the contents of specific issues. One message is about a new book, and a further message is a follow up to this, as the sender forgot to give the name of the publisher in his first message. One message gives information about a new CD-ROM.
- 17 Nine of the messages give information about forthcoming conferences. Two of these are calls for papers, while a further two are announcements which incorporate calls for papers. There is also an announcement of a seminar. Two of the messages are reminders concerning conferences, and one is extending an abstract deadline. One message gives a website address which is said to have updated conference information. In addition two of the messages announce job vacancies, and one gives a website address.

- 18 There are eight messages which are requests for help or information. Some of these are straightforward requests for grammatical or lexical information.

Can anyone tell me the origin of the word AUTISM. *sysfling*, 29.11.00.

[...] information about Greek Mood, especially the uses of subjunctive of giving orders and of the Imperative, and their difference in use and meaning. *sysfling*, 23.11.00.

- 19 Some messages request help with a specific example of analysis, or ask for constructive criticism of a suggested analysis, or of suggested ideas.

I'm carrying out a research on transitivity, would classify the following sentence: "She was able to think clear and fast". [sic] *sysfling*, 15.12.00.

[name] is writing on the pedagogical contribution of functional linguistics in the communicative approach and would like to know if his view is right or wrong. *sysfling*, 15.11.00.

- 20 The second of these messages was accompanied by an attached file containing a text by the person in question. As a longstanding subscriber to this list, I can vouch for the fact that messages of this type, particularly those asking for help with analyses, frequently lead to extended discussion, though there are no examples of this in the two-month period under study.

In addition some requests were for references.

Does anyone know of work using SFL to analyse sales encounters? *sysfling*, 22.11.00

[...] who wrote the text NOTICE OF REVOCATION OF INDEPENDENCE. Has it been published in any newspaper? *sysfling*, 29.11.00

And some relate to teaching problems.

I am trying to determine how advanced the technology is in terms of grading student texts [...] My hope is that someone can tell me if it is feasible yet [...] *sysfling*, 30.11.00

I have not been able to find much on the topic of certification for teachers of indigenous [Amerindian] languages [...] Has anybody else argued along the lines of sovereignty [...] What other solutions have been devised? *sysfling*, 11.12.00

There was one (rather strange) message which was a request for action.

Does anyone in the UK (or nearby) have a copy of the following. [book reference]

I believe I have a chapter in it and, if so, would really like to get a photocopy of the chapter as soon as possible.

If you do have a copy, and would be in a position to post me a photocopy, could you contact me please. I will be very grateful and eternally in your debt. *sysfling*, 30.11.00

- 21 There were ten messages which were replies to these requests. This obviously does not exhaust the replies which were sent. Some people send replies personally to the original requester without necessarily posting them on the general list, and this is sometimes evident in thank-you messages, where a person is thanked for a reply which has not appeared on the list.
- 22 The other messages which appear in the corpus are an obituary notice for Jan Firbas, a general thank-you message, two jokes, or joke-related messages, and two subscribe/unsubscribe messages.

Tenor

- 23 Tenor is instantiated by the type of illocutionary act involved, since this determines part of the relationship between the speaker and his addressee(s). Thus a question (request for

information) imposes the role of potential answerer on the addressee. Halliday suggests that all illocutionary acts fall into one of four basic categories. These categories are determined by two distinctions: the first is between giving and demanding, the second between goods and services on the one hand, and information on the other. He refers to giving or demanding goods and services as 'proposals', and giving or demanding information as 'propositions' (Halliday 1994, Martin 1992, Downing & Locke 1992, Thompson 1996).

Table 2. Adapted from Halliday (1994: 69)

Commodity exchanged →	goods and services	information
Role in exchange ↓		
giving	'offer' Would you like this teapot?	'statement' He's giving her the teapot.
demanding	'command' Give me that teapot.	'question' What is he giving her?

- 24 According to Halliday giving and demanding are the “fundamental types of speech role, which lie behind all more specific types that we may eventually be able to recognize” (1994: 68).
- 25 In this corpus there is a strong bias towards the information side of the equation. We have seen that information is supplied on publications and on conferences, with the exception of those messages that are calls for papers. In addition messages about job vacancies supply information about the vacancy in question, and messages giving website addresses are giving information, as are replies to requests for help or information. Perhaps more marginally one might consider an obituary notice to carry information about the life and death of the deceased person; thank-you messages might be conceived of as giving information about the psychological state of the sender, and jokes could possibly be thought of as some sort of humorous information. These last two would presumably fall into the category of expressives in Searle's taxonomy (1979). These account for 30 of the messages in the corpus, or 70%.
- 26 Requests for help and information fall into the category of demanding information. There are eight messages of this type, i.e., 19%. Thus one might say that giving and demanding information accounts for virtually 90% of the corpus.
- 27 Consequently, only a small number of messages are concerned with goods and services. The following might be classed as demands for goods and services, that is objects or actions. One message was a request of goods (in fact, a photocopy of a chapter in a book). Calls for papers are requests for appropriate persons to take action, i.e., propose a paper. And subscribe/unsubscribe messages might be taken as requests for action on the part of the community, or of the webmaster as their representative. A total of five messages (12% of the corpus) fall into this category. There are no messages in the corpus which can be classed as giving goods and services.
- 28 The above gives a simple classification, but this probably oversimplifies the real situation, and future research might consider the possible hybrid nature of some of these messages. For example announcements of conferences which incorporate calls for papers are presumably both giving information and requesting action. Some may have a more remote secondary function. Information on publications gives information, but may also function as a invitation to buy, which is an attenuated form of demanding goods and

services. Similarly, job vacancies give information, but act as an invitation to suitably qualified persons to apply, which again is a form of demanding goods and services.

Mode

- 29 The mode of these messages is quite obviously written to be read, but in view of the commonly observed conversational or speech-like traits of this genre, it is appropriate to ask whether these features are present in this corpus. Even without any extended analysis, one can say that it is not particularly so; on the contrary the general style is fairly conservative, and this might be the result of the asynchronous nature of this type of list, where it is possible to edit and correct before clicking on the 'send' button. However, a fair number of the messages do have traces of the letter genre, at least to the extent that they have letter-style opening and/or closing formulae.
- 30 These openings are to be found in seventeen (40%) of the messages. The following list gives those to be found in a (very rough) order of formality.

Dear colleagues
 Dear friends
 Dear all (3)
 Dear sysflingers (3)
 Dear flingers and funcers
 Greetings
 Greetings from Ottawa, Canada
 Hi!
 Hi all
 Hiyall
 Dear Chrystella
 Dear Simon
 Lenore

- 31 *Sysfling* has a sister list known as *sysfunc*. Presumably the message headed "Dear flingers and funcers" was posted on both lists. It will also be noted that three messages were addressed personally though they were posted on the general list.
- 32 Of the eight demands for information, five (63%) had a letter opening. Of the thirty messages giving information twelve (40%) had such an opening, and this includes five of the ten replies to requests.
- 33 Closing formulae were present in a significant number of messages. Fifteen messages had a name only as a closing formula. A further eighteen had some sort of letter-type closure, usually preceding a name. These, again in rough order of formality, were as follows.

Respectfully submitted
 Yours sincerely
 Sincerely (2)
 Our best wishes to you for a happy holiday season!
 With best wishes
 Best wishes
 Best regards
 Regards
 Best
 Thank you very much
 Thanks in anticipation

Many thanks!
 Thanks
 Greetings to everyone
 Cheers from Sook Hee
 Cheers (2)

- 34 Of the messages demanding information, four out of eight (50%) had a closure. This was the case for twelve out of thirty (40%) of those giving information. However, only one of the five messages demanding goods and services had such a closure.
- 35 In the corpus as a whole, twenty-six messages (60%) had an opening or closing formula, or both; seventeen had neither. Those that had neither include both of the joke related messages, though the fact that these were forwarded from other sources may have something to do with this. The others were three out of six (50%) of those giving publication information, four out of nine (44%) of those giving conference information, three out of eight (38%) of the requests for information, and three out of ten (30%) replies to requests. Overall, it is the requests and their replies that are most likely to bear these traces of the letter format.

Final Remarks

- 36 In this study I have considered a small corpus from an academic discussion list (*sysfling*) in terms of the three variables of the context of situation, Field, Tenor and Mode, as they are defined in Systemic Functional Linguistics. In terms of Field, eighteen messages give information of some sort, most commonly (9 messages) about conferences, including calls for papers, while a further six are concerned with various types of publication (journals, books and electronic publications). Eight messages are requests of various types (for grammatical information, help with analyses, references, and teaching problems); a further ten messages are replies to requests. Consideration of Tenor indicates a strong bias towards giving information and this accounts for 70% (30 messages) of the corpus, while 19% (8 messages) is accounted for by requests for information. The remainder (5 messages) are requests for goods or action, since there are no examples of offers of goods or action in this sample. Consideration of Mode shows that this is a written genre which has to some extent been influenced by the letter genre, since many of the messages bear some of the formal traces of the letter. Seventeen messages have letter-type openings; twelve of these giving information and the remaining five requesting information. Fifteen messages end with the name of the sender, while a further eighteen incorporate a letter-type formula.
- 37 The corpus used for this pilot study was very small, so it is likely that there are some features that it has missed. Indeed, I know that extended discussions do occur, though none appear in the sample. A more extensive study should pick up the features missed here. In this study I have concentrated on the major function of each message, but a more detailed study might bring out the fact that many messages may have multiple or minor functions. Further study might also look at the effect of procedures made possible by techniques which are specific to electronic communication. What are the effects produced by the possibility of simply forwarding messages as opposed to writing them? How are cut-and-paste techniques, and the possibility of interleaving a current message with sections of previous messages being used? The answers to these questions will no doubt reveal new features of this sub-genre.

- 38 The academic discussion list is an interesting sub-genre which has so far received comparatively little attention. In comparison with some other types of electronic discourse, it seems to be fairly staid; there are comparatively few similes; in general the language used is bookish rather than conversational, and the highly informal language, associated with some types of e-mail exchange, is very rare in this sub-genre. Since it is a sub-genre which is still in its infancy, it is still in an unstable and fairly fluid state, and might be expected to change fairly substantially in the near future, before settling down to a more sedate rate of change. This is something which it has in common with other varieties of electronic discourse. It is something of a linguistic privilege to be in on the birth of a new type of discourse, where we can see new genre features being created virtually before our eyes. It is not just the immediacy of the electronic exchange which makes it different; the very fact of writing on screen, rather than on paper, is a change of momentous importance which should not be underestimated. Future generations of linguists may well look back and think of this moment in the same terms as we do of the discourse changes produced in English by Caxton's importation of mechanical printing in the fifteenth century. It is my hope that this small study will help in the endeavour to understand this new sub-genre and its mode of development, while providing some pointers for future research.
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ABSTRACTS

The e-mail discussion list is a sub-genre which has evolved comparatively recently. As such, it has not yet received extensive consideration by linguists. This study uses the concepts of Field, Tenor and Mode, derived from systemic Functional Linguistics, to analyse a corpus of messages posted on the sysfling discussion list. Consideration of Field shows that the major functions served by the list are supplying information, requesting information, and replying to those requests. The illocutionary act of giving information is by far the most significant element in Tenor, most of the rest being accounted for by requests for information. A consideration of Mode reveals traces of the letter genre in a large number of messages.

Le forum de discussion électronique constitue un sous-genre d'évolution récente. Il n'a de ce fait pas encore fait l'objet de l'attention approfondie des linguistes. Cette étude utilise les concepts de Champ, Teneur et Mode, dérivés de la Linguistique Systémique Fonctionnelle, afin d'analyser un corpus de messages envoyés sur la liste sysfling. Au regard du champ, l'étude indique que les fonctions principales sont de donner de l'information, de solliciter de l'information et de répondre à ces sollicitations. Au regard du concept de Teneur, l'acte illocutoire de loin le plus important est de donner de l'information. Au regard du Mode, l'étude révèle des traces du genre épistolaire dans un nombre considérable de messages.

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Keywords: e-mail, field, register, tenor

Mots-clés: champ, courriel, mode, registre, sysfling, teneur

AUTHOR

DAVID BANKS

David Banks est professeur à l'Université de Bretagne Occidentale (Brest). Il est Président du Département d'anglais, Directeur de l'ERLA (Équipe de recherche en linguistique appliquée), Président de l'Association française de la linguistique systémique fonctionnelle et rédacteur de l'ESP France Newsletter. David.Banks@univ-brest.fr