

Written conversations or spoken letters? A multilingual approach to the linguistic and pragmatic features of e-mails

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to delve into the features of e-mail, a form of CMC (computer mediated communication) which has been described as a modality of the so-called *digital genre*. By advocating the notion of a continuum or “spectrum” (Baron, 1998) plus a parameter-based description of e-mail features as regards format, grammar, vocabulary, style and social context, e-mails were found to be located at some distance from both the traditional modalities of spoken and written language, a conclusion supported by corpus studies of English e-mails carried out, among others, by Gains (1999), Li (2000) and Crystal (2001). Since e-mails exhibit features of both spoken and written language, they could be regarded as a hybrid modality. However, some authors (Gains, 1999; Crystal, 2001) point out that at least some types of e-mails are developing features of their own; consequently, it might seem adequate to categorize them as a “creolizing modality” (Baron, 1998). On these grounds, it is here suggested that e-mail is an essentially dynamic modality of CMC, and that e-mails themselves can be distributed along a continuum considering their purpose and contextual features. The final part of the paper is devoted to the analysis of a corpus of business (academic) and personal e-mails in both Spanish and Catalan. Besides supporting the continuum-based view of e-mails outlined here, the analysis verifies the existence of the above features of e-mail also outside “e-mail English”.

Key words

continuum, e-mail, hybrid, speech, writing