

Framing Discourse in a New Medium: Openings in Electronic Mail

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Much of the work within discourse analysis has concentrated, in the last decade or so, on the different strategies used by speakers to achieve continuity between otherwise temporally or spatially disjunct sequences of talk. In this tradition, the function of certain linguistic expressions is seen mostly, if not exclusively, as the retrieval of background information or the introduction of some new information, that might need to be recalled at some later point (cf. the papers in Givón, 1979; Givón, 1983). The presence of anaphoric or "dislocated" constituents is interpreted by the analyst as dependent upon the speaker's understanding of the hearer's cognitive accessibility to a given topic.

When we look at discourse not exclusively as the locus of exchange of information but also, and crucially, as one of the domains for establishing social relationships and more generally defining the social order in which we live, we realize that "discourse continuity" is only one small aspect of a more general phenomenon, namely, the creation and maintenance of a universe in which individuals and the events that are relevant to their lives are connected to one another in meaningful ways.

The creation of such meaningfulness is one of the greatest challenges that speakers-hearers, *qua* social actors, must face in constructing discourse units. The deconstruction of such work is an equally complex and difficult task for the analysts. One way of reducing some of the complexities is that of choosing a corpus in which the analyst's disadvantage corresponds to the participants'. The study of telephone conversation by Schegloff and Sacks (1973; Schegloff, in press) is one such example. The usual problem of accounting for the non-linguistic context is partly avoided by studying an interaction in which the participants themselves have no access to the on-going non-verbal behavior. In this paper, I have also chosen to document a system of communication in which some of the analyst's puzzlement in figuring out how to look at the data may be echoed by the

participants' preoccupation about how to use a new medium. The new medium I will be discussing is electronic mail (hereafter "E mail").

E mail is an asynchronous (i.e., non-real time) system of communication in which people who have an account on a computer system can send messages to other users of the same computer as well as to users of any other computer that is part of the same network. Such messages are stored in a "mailbox" and can be read by the recipients at any later point. (Users are told of the presence of new mail by a message that appears on the screen when they log in.) [cf. Bannon, 1986; Crook, 1985; Quinn, Mehan, Levin, & Black, 1983; Scollon, 1982].

Being in a new medium, E mail users must learn and test the properties of the system while at the same time coping with the more general needs of communicating and interacting successfully. As we shall see, one of the problems that users address is that of achieving discourse continuity. Users display a concern for constructing a universe of discourse that would be linked to other domains of interaction, through other media (e.g., face-to-face interaction), and to other aspects of the social identity of the parties involved (e.g., relationships other than those established or presupposed by the use of E mail). This kind of *inter-domain continuity* is common in other media as well. The issue is whether the manner in which such continuity is achieved differs from one medium to another. In particular, it is theoretically interesting to find out whether some of the properties of E mail shape or constrain the particular ways in which users try to establish continuity.

This paper is a first attempt at isolating some specific framing devices that novices and experts use to achieve continuity in E mail.

Data

This study is based on a corpus of several hundred electronic messages collected over a period of nine months (September, 1984 - May, 1985).¹ Most messages were exchanged between my students and myself in two courses I taught at Pitzer College of the Claremont Colleges. The first class was "Introduction to Linguistics," where E mail played a minor, albeit interesting, role. The second class, "Computers as Tools," focussed instead on the uses of computers in a range of con-

[The text is truncated because the user tried to type the entire message at the Subject line, which allows only a limited number of characters.]

(3)

From: LANGUAGE 24-SEP-1984 13:43

To: ADURANTI

Subj: LINGUISTICS/LYONS

HI, PROFESSOR DURANTI! SORRY I DIDN'T COME UP SOONER. I GUESS I'M JUST TOO LAZY TO TAKE THE LONG TREK UP HERE FROM POMONA. READ MOST OF CHAPTER 3 IN LYONS [...]

[SIGNED]

I first thought that opening greetings were typical of novices, that is, of people who are new to the medium and have not yet mastered its properties. New users seemed to apply conventions learned in some other domain of interaction.

I soon discovered, however, that the use of greetings in the first message is not confined to novices. Expert E mail users also employ them. Example (4) is a message from an expert programmer and frequent E mail user trying to reach Michael Cole's students at UCSD:

(4)

4CCVAX::LANGUAGE 13-MAR-1985 11:04

To: [Long Address]

Subj: Hello from Pitzer College

Hi there! My name is James [LAST NAME], and I'm a student of Allesandro Duranti's. I'm testing out some mail routings for Mr. Duranti. I'll keep this short, since I don't know if it will get to you.

Thanks!

James

The same opening greeting is found in a second attempt (14 minutes later). Michael Cole's reply from UCSD to our first successful link up (on the 17th of March) also contains an opening greeting. I used greetings in my first message to another computer class at Pitzer (March 14) and one of the three students who replied to my message also started with greetings, shown in (5):

(5)

From: 4CCVAX::CG 8-APR-1985 15:02

To: ADURANTI

Subj: RETURN MESSAGE

HI PROFESSOR DURANTI! MY NAME IS CLAUDIA [LAST NAME] AND I AM VERY MUCH INTEREST & ED IN WHAT YOU AND YOUR CLASS ARE DOING. [...]

Opening greetings in E mail remind us of openings in other contexts and through other media such as face-to-face encounters and telephone conversations. The use of greetings in E mail, however, shows a pattern of its own. In a telephone conversation, greetings tend to be used in the opening sequence of almost every call (cf. Schegloff, in press); in face-to-face interaction in American society, opening greetings are typically used at the first encounter in the day; they seem to mark "day units" (or even shorter units during the same day, especially when people meet again but in the context of a different setting or activity).

In face-to-face encounters, initial greetings, such as "Hi" are used to signal that the parties are willing or ready to interact with one another. This is typical, for instance, of service encounters: The cashier saying "Hi" implies that he or she will be dealing with your merchandise next and will be considering you as the main or preferred interlocutor. On some occasions, greetings may be exchanged even more than once within the same day. In E mail, instead, greetings mark the beginning of much longer units. In fact, in E mail, *after contact has been made* (which involves two turns: first message and reply to first message) *greetings tend not to be used again*, even when several days or weeks might have passed from the last message. They seem to signal the beginning of an interaction in a *new discourse domain* which, once established, does not need to be renegotiated every time. It would seem that senders assume a continuous availability on the part of the recipients that might be related to the asynchronous nature of the interaction (cf. Scollon, 1982). At the same time, as I will show in the next section, users do exhibit some concern about how to start subsequent messages when they perform certain kinds of speech acts.

Opening Address Forms

The format of E mail is such that (at least in the software used in this case) the receiver knows the intended addressee of the message (e.g., To: ADURANTI). Despite this feature of the

tinuity is created by selecting features of activities, aspects of the social identity of the sender and/or addressee that point to a universe of discourse that transcends E mail.

In the messages I received from students in my "Introduction to Linguistics" class, for instance, it was common to have words, comments or greetings in a foreign language. This feature related to the subject matter of the class, in which, as common in linguistics classes, lectures and discussions made frequent use of examples from a variety of languages. Bringing up this feature was thus a way of tying the current communicative event to another type of event where we normally interacted. It was a way of *reminding* me of our shared history, a way of recognizing a common interest and in so doing achieving solidarity, co-membership.

(10)

From: LANGUAGE 20-SEP-1984 10:57
To: LANGUAGE
Subj: BUENOS DIAS SR. DURANTI.

I WENT TO THE BOOKSTORE YESTERDAY (19-SEP-84) TO PURCHASE THE OTHER TWO LINGUISTIC BOOKS AND THEY ARE STILL NOT IN, [...]

(11)

From: MO 26-SEP-1984 10:36
To: LANGUAGE
Subj: bon jour

My first language spoken at home was Spanish. My parents have been successful in teaching in teaching me their native language rather well. [...] I'm in the process of attempting to learn the French language, what are the chances of my learning and comprehending this third language as well as I have learned Spanish and English? What else besides learning the grammar rules of that language will help me to start thinking "FRENCH?" [...]

(12) (After I replied to her message)

From: MO
To: LANGUAGE
Subj: MERCI

Novices are here bringing in, within the E mail domain of discourse, pieces of some past history. They both rely on such past history and draw attention to it. The form and content of the message often evoke or explicitly bring up some features of interactional work or shared assumptions that had been established on some other prior occasion.

Code-switching is a well known strategy for establishing solidarity despite or beyond the social roles expected in the particular event (Blom & Gumperz, 1972). It is not surprising then that students would use it in sending a message to their teacher. What is interesting, in these cases, is not so much that code-switching took place, but which language is used, when, and why. Whereas the students in the introductory linguistics class used whatever language they knew, the students in my "Computers as Tools" class restricted their choice to Italian. This time the foreign language was used as a link to me as an Italian and not necessarily as a linguist professionally interested in *any* foreign language. Here are a couple of examples:

(13) (First message by a student who speaks Italian and has been in Italy. The assignment was to recount their previous experience with computers.)

From: 4CCVAX::RL 23-JAN-1985 14:37
To: ADURANTI
Subj: HOMEWORK1

BON GIORNO! COME STAI? I HAVE STUDIED BASIC AND LISP. HAVE ALSO TAKEN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. I'VE OPERATED SEVERAL MICROCOMPUTERS. I USED BOTH THE BAX AND THE COMPUTERS AT POMONA FOR THEIR SPSS PROGRAMS. CIAO. [FIRST NAME]

(14)

From: 4CCVAX::RL 21-APR-1985 15:08
To: ADURANTI
Subj: c'e un problema

I received a message from [First and last name] that I felt was very negative. I'll forward it to you after this. It was my impression that the computer mail was intended for [sic] communicating and sharing ideas. Io non capisco questi Americani!

A Martedi, Bon Giorno, [FIRST NAME]

Example (14) is from a student (RL) who used at least one Italian word in 10 out of 14 messages he sent me. With one exception, *the placement of the foreign words was either at the beginning (in the subject line³ or in the opening greeting) or at the end of the message*, in some cases, in both places. Italian words functioned as *boundary markers*, linking the past and preparing the way to the future. They were also metastatements,

E mail. Rather than using it for describing what the message is about, experts often use it as a slot for displaying their attitude or for evoking the addressee's sympathy or interest. In such cases, the social meaning of language is often given precedence over its descriptive or referential power.

Conclusions

In conclusion, a number of interesting facts emerge from a first analysis of the use of framing devices in opening E mail messages:

- (1) Those who exchange electronic messages display an understanding of this form of communication as a *separate domain* from other everyday interactions. Specific framing devices are thus used (i) to establish the new medium as a viable channel for opening up communication in a new discourse domain (see the use of opening greetings in the first message), and (ii) to achieve continuity with other domains of interaction/universes of discourse (see the use of foreign words to evoke past or present co-membership).
- (2) Certain features of the system are sometimes ignored by users who, instead of relying on the information displayed by the E mail format (e.g., identity of the addressee as revealed in the "To" line), introduce framing conventions (e.g., opening address terms) found in other domains of interaction (e.g., face-to-face). Other times, an option offered by the system for efficient communication (*viz-a-viz* the Subject line) is reinterpreted as a slot for rhetorical discourse (*viz-a-viz* the use of metaphors).
- (3) Novices and experts display a different understanding of the use of certain features of the medium (*viz-a-viz* the use of the Subject line). Such differences imply a differential ability across users to manipulate or creatively violate the system. They also point to the limits of the software designers' predictions, given that the more familiar people become with the system, the more often they tend to violate the constraints set or suggested by the designers. According to Dreyfus, Dreyfus, & Athanasiou (1986), this is an ability typical of experts in general. What is interesting in the case of E mail is

the *ways* in which experts play around with the supposed norms. Such ways seem to suggest alternative theories of what particular features of the system should be used for.

One of the properties of any system of communication is its *complementarity*: It is tied to other systems which often use different media. Any medium must thus allow its users to link up with a world of experience and social life that exists outside of the particular interaction in which the particular medium is used. The way in which people will create such a link is the product of many factors. Some of these factors are the physical properties of the medium, whereas others have to do with the conceptual design of the message format. Some of the conventions used are imported or adapted from other domains. Some other ones are creative interpretations of the designer's suggestions. Like other, older media have already done, E mail may soon establish some sound forms of conventionality, which may be harder to violate. In the meantime, we are offered the unique opportunity to watch and discuss the constitution of a new form of communication. This paper has discussed some of the strategies that novices and experts use in framing their messages for their audience.

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Notes

¹For the purpose of this paper, I have closely examined 300 messages.

²The typical format for the username is first initial plus last name, e.g., ADURANTI, JSMITH. To protect the identity of the users, I have left only their initials. "LANGUAGE" is an account used by those students who, for some reason, were unable to get or use their own account. Brackets ([]) mark information that I have added, omitted, or slightly altered to protect the identity of the E mail users.

³The fact that foreign words are found in the subject line should not be surprising. Given the format of E mail, the subject line was the first occasion/slot where the user/sender could start establishing common grounds/co-membership. (The subject line does in fact