CORPORATE COMMUNICATION COLLECTION
Debbie D. DuFrene, *Editor*

Writing Online

A Guide to Effective Digital Communication at Work

Erika Darics

BEP BUSINESS EXPERT PRESS

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First published in 2016 by
Business Expert Press, LLC
222 East 46th Street, New York, NY 10017
www.businessexpertpress.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-60649-780-7 (paperback)
ISBN-13: 978-1-60649-781-4 (e-book)

Business Expert Press Corporate Communication Collection

Collection ISSN: 2156-8162 (print)
Collection ISSN: 2156-8170 (electronic)

Cover and interior design by Exeter Premedia Services Private Ltd., Chennai, India

First edition: 2016

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

Abstract

Online writing plays a complex and increasingly prominent role in the life of organizations. From newsletters to press releases, social media marketing and advertising to virtual presentations and interactions via e-mail and instant messaging, digital writing intertwines and affects the day-to-day running of the company—yet we rarely pay enough attention to it. Typing on the screen can become particularly problematic because digital text-based communication increases the opportunities for misunderstanding: it lacks the direct audiovisual contact and the norms and conventions that would normally help people to understand each other.

Providing a clear, convincing and approachable discussion, this book addresses the arenas of online writing: virtual teamwork, instant messaging, e-mails, corporate communication channels, and social media. Instead of offering do and don't lists, however, it teaches the reader to develop a practice that is observant, reflective, and grounded in the understanding of the basic principles of language and communication. Through real-life examples and case studies, it helps the reader to notice the previously unnoticed small details, question the previously unchallenged assumptions and practices, and become a competent digital communicator in a wide range of professional contexts.

Keywords

deanex-method, digital communication, digital corporate communication, digital writing, e-mail, instant messaging, interactional sociolinguistics, virtual work

Contents

Acknowledgments

This book came about as a result of the frustration I experienced when preparing material for my Professional Communication classes. Training materials seemed to be unable to keep pace with developments in communication technology, and the advice provided seemed to be based on anecdotal evidence rather than actual research and real-life data. The materials presented in this book are based on a combination of research into digital business discourse and the training materials I have developed by drawing on the findings of digital discourse analysis. Many of the ideas came about after talking to academic colleagues and to the students and trainees with whom I have been fortunate enough to work.

I am particularly thankful for my nonlinguist students and trainees, who have not only opened my eyes to many aspects of digital communication in professional contexts, but have also pushed me to learn to talk about language and linguistics in an approachable way. Students commented that my language-centered approach made them think about business in a way they didn't know existed, pushed them to think critically, and encouraged continuous reflection on their own communication. Comments like these confirmed that I was on the right track.

Writing in an approachable, nonacademic way was not an easy task, however. I would not have been able to do it had it not been for two fantastic professionals, Laura Hood and Kyle Campbell, who helped me tremendously to write in a style alien to me. Their tireless editing of the script combined with their insightful comments about the content hugely improved the original version of the book.

I am also greatly indebted to my colleagues, Caroline Tagg and Camilla Vasquez, whose feedback ensured that the content of the book is academically robust. Their contribution to the manuscript does not end there, though: their pioneering work in the field of digital discourse analysis has greatly influenced my thinking, as you will find throughout the book.

I am extremely grateful to my editor, Debbie DuFrene, and the fantastic team at Business Expert Press, for the forbearance and for making the manuscript preparation a painless, smooth process.

Last, my heartfelt love and thanks goes to my husband for his patience and support. Now that I have finally written a book without the academic lingo, he will have no excuse but to read it. This is why I dedicate this book to him.

CHAPTER 1

Digital Writing—What is the Big Deal?

When a curious message reading "LO" was transmitted in 1969, between two networked computers at the Stanford Research Institute and UCLA, a new era was born: the era of constant connectivity and computer-mediated communication. Although the transmission, which was supposed to send the word LOGIN, crashed half way, the connection between two networked computers was established. Although this earliest version of the "Net"—the ARPANET—was not originally intended for interpersonal communication, people soon began using it for both communicating in real time—instant messaging—and for sending electronic messages.[1]

Apart from social interactions, the early users of the Net soon saw its potential as a professional communication tool. The new technology enabled the sharing of information between geographically dispersed parties, and so changed the landscape of work communication forever. Networked computers and mobile communication technologies now play a prominent role in modern organizations, and are expected to expand at an unprecedented rate in the future.[2] The rules and norms of digitally mediated interactions are far from conventional, however. Despite having been around for more than 40 years, digital business communication is still evolving, and at a fast pace.

Communication for professional purposes and in professional situations is a "complex business," says Holmes, a prominent scholar and sociolinguist studying workplace interactions. People tend to have multiple and intertwining communicative goals: They need to develop and maintain professional and social relationships with coworkers while also completing their daily tasks and working toward the organization's explicit objectives.[3] This means that in order to complete work and cooperate effectively, people should be able to communicate their work-related messages clearly, preventing any misunderstandings about the content while making sure that they maintain good relations and collegial relationships. This balance is not self-evident. It requires significant effort from the people involved, particularly in environments where professional roles are asymmetrical (such as between senior and junior members of staff).

In the "virtual workplace," this inherently complex situation is even more challenging. When people do not share the same physical environment and are restricted to written communication, such as e-mails or instant messaging, all understanding must be achieved through their typed messages. It is not surprising that while trying to communicate the varied—at times even competing—explicit and implicit messages, people use a wide range of strategies to ensure that both the content of their messages and their intention are communicated and interpreted correctly. In the digital realm, we cannot use nonverbal cues such as facial expressions or tone of voice, which normally help us to fine tune our messages. We have to fall back only on words and other written techniques.

In external communication (i.e., in contexts when an organization "officially" communicates with external stakeholders), new communication channels, social media platforms, blogs, and collaborative sites have brought about unprecedented changes. What was once a centralized way of communicating, with messages issued from the top of an organization, has now become an immediate, interactive, democratic exchange of messages. As corporate communication scholar Cornelissen puts it, new media "is quickly changing how dialogues occur, how news about the organizations are generated and disseminated, and how stakeholder perceptions are shaped and relationships forged."[4] This is a worrying thought for many organizations. They are now expected to respond to their customers instantaneously without time to align communication efforts and verify messages, even though these are the very messages that form the basis of the impressions people take away about them—messages that influence reputation, trust, and consequently, business success.

Businesses are now under constant scrutiny and people are keen to engage with them—both for positive and negative reasons. It is not surprising, therefore, that companies now need to devote considerable resources to managing communications and making sense of the data they obtain from online interactions. In today's economy, the winners will be those businesses that have a clear understanding of a range of digitally mediated communication channels and that "develop their employees' language and digital skillsets to use them."[5] In Hulme's words, these technologically savvy and linguistically able "Linguarati" are now seen as an asset to any organization.

Considering the highly important nature of communication in workplace interactions and corporate communication, it is not surprising that communication skills have now attained a crucial status among the qualities required in white-collar workplaces. We can see this trend in recent job advertisements where good communication and soft skills are almost always among the essential criteria. But we can also see it in reports that expose the problems created by the lack of strong communication skills. A recent survey, for example, shows that ineffective communication is the cause of failure in 56 percent of strategic projects (In US$75 million of every $1 billion spent). The survey identifies poor language use as one of the main causes of ineffective communication and shows that 80 percent of projects that are communicated with sufficient clarity and detail, in the language of the audience, are able to meet their original business goals.[6]

Despite the growing importance of communication, traditional business communication training is not always effective in developing needed skills. Educators often take an overtly prescriptive approach, failing to raise awareness of the important nature of language and offering little help in developing a critical understanding of how language works in professional contexts. This is especially striking in the case of digital media, where training materials struggle to keep up with the speed of technological developments, are overtly normative, and do not acknowledge what academic research has to say.

In this book, we will set out to fill this gap. But instead of offering "winning recipes" for effective online communication, we will show you the details that might have gone unnoticed before—the choice of words and punctuation, the depth of detail and level of formality, and even the effects enabled by the various technical features of digital communication tools, such as e-mail.

The concepts in this book will help you develop a practice that is observant, reflective, and grounded in the understanding of the basic principles of communication. And by looking at real-life examples, you will have the chance to observe how messages are created and interpreted. By making the link between theory and practice, the book will help you critically examine and improve your own approach and even extend this beyond the digital realm. You will sharpen your awareness of the subtleties of communication and language use—both in relation to your own communication and that of others.

This book is not intended solely for readers interested in language. It is for anyone who has had a message misread or misinterpreted and anyone who has wondered about the appropriate level of formality to use when writing a digital message. It is for anyone who has hesitated before adding a smiley at the end of a work e-mail or been surprised to see one in a message he or she has received. This book is primarily intended for professionals who communicate using digitally mediated communicative channels:

- Managers, virtual team leaders, and negotiators who use digital writing for professional interpersonal interactions;
- Communicators and customer service and PR specialists who use digital media to communicate with external stakeholders,
- Marketing and branding specialists as well as copywriters who create texts to be read online by a range of audiences.

The book is also intended for communication trainers or teachers of business and professional communication. The theory and language-centered approach offers an effective way to appreciate and learn about the complexities of human interaction. The comprehensive review of scholarship offers an insight into a wide range of studies to explore further; and the wealth of examples, case studies, and reflections could also serve as starting points for developing teaching and training materials.

Finally, this book is also for students and scholars interested in the intersection of computer-mediated communication, professional communication, and applied linguistics. Although more accessible than typical academic texts, the book sets out to combine the academic findings of the related disciplinary areas to further our understanding of how linguistic choices and communication strategies shape meaning, reveal or hide intentions, help us to negotiate power, and establish relationships in digital contexts.

What This Book Is All About

When I teach digital communication, I often show trainees a task from a book on effective writing skills.[7] I ask them to compare four different e-mails and choose the most appropriate one for a given context. The brief goes like this:

> *Jim Bennett is the international sales manager of a company. He heads a team of 12 sales representatives from all over the world. Every week they have a telephone conference. However, in the "telecon" a few team members talk a lot and some never say anything. Jim is sending an e-mail to the team. He wants their ideas about how to solve this problem.*
>
> *Read the e-mails in Figure 1.1. Compare the format, tone, and level of formality of these messages. Decide which message is best for Jim to send, and why.*

TASK 1.1

Based on the format, tone, and level of formality, which one would you choose? Why?

Choosing the most appropriate e-mail for this situation does not appear to be a particularly difficult task. Typically, people choose message B in Figure 1.1 or occasionally they opt for message D. But are these really the right answers? Is there a "right answer" at all? I think not. Communication just isn't that simple—there is an extremely complex web of interacting factors that contribute to our understanding of e-mails, letters, and other messages. Situational context, for example, has a great effect on how people communicate to achieve their goals, as does the relationship between the person writing and his or her audience.

A	B
Hey Everyone, Don't forget. I need your ideas as soon as possible How can we shut those guys up so the rest of us can talk, huh?:-) Jim	Hi Everyone, As I mentioned in our teleconference on Monday, we're having trouble getting ideas from everyone. Some people are talking a lot and we appreciate that, but others feel they don't have a chance to say anything. What can we do to be sure everyone has an opportunity to speak? Please let me know what you think, so that we can get some good discussion going. Thanks, Jim
C	**D**
Hello, this is Jim from headquarters. Don't forget to send your ideas to the group ASAP. Thanks.	Dear Team Members: I'm writing about the problem that has come to my attention about not hearing from all or our team members during our weekly telephone conferences. I invite all our team members to give me their ideas about how to solve this problem. I look forward to hearing from all team members at their earliest convenience. Sincerely yours, Jim.

Figure 1.1 Textbook examples of e-mail style

In the aforementioned example, let's imagine that Jim gets on really well with his colleagues. They have been getting together for team-building trips for a decade and have become close friends. They share baby photos with each other and everyone was invited to the wedding when one member of the team got married last year. Would this information affect which e-mail you choose as "appropriate"? Personal and professional relationships can be blurred and that raises questions about how we address one another.

In addition to this local, narrow context there is also a wider issue of social factors, such as the norms or culture of a group and the power relationships between people in it. What if there is an expectation within Jim's company that superiors maintain a distance from their employees? What if it is against unwritten rules to behave too informally as a boss? Understanding this information may impact our view of which e-mail is the most appropriate for Jim.

While context influences communication choices in many other ways, my aim here is not to give a detailed account of them all (if you are interested, there are some brilliant publications on the subject, some of which are recommended in Chapter 8). The main point is that communication is a highly complex event, with several intertwining layers of meaning, intention, context, and interpretation. The example e-mails in Figure 1.1 show that there is not necessarily a right or wrong way to communicate. There are different contexts and different aims, and people adapt their communication strategies accordingly. To improve communication skills, you need to think about these complexities and understand how language works in professional contexts. Hewings and Hewings point out:

> As we gain experience of a variety of contexts, we build up an expertise in language use appropriate to them so that as adults we are usually able rapidly to assess a situation in which we find ourselves and fine-tune our language use so that it is appropriate. Even as skilled language users, however, we occasionally find ourselves in new contexts and may be unsure of what to say and how to say it.[8]

This book addresses one of these new contexts: digital media. Specifically, it looks at text-based computer-mediated communication—the digital written communication that has become such a central part of our working lives. The idea is to help you develop a higher level of communication awareness and focus on our own communication practices. You can learn to pause, take a step back, and ask important questions related to why people choose certain words or grammar, and what they were hoping to achieve by doing so. Your newly acquired communication awareness, boosted by your understanding of communication theories, will then enable you to examine how others could interpret your messages and what kind of impressions they might form based on them.

Tasks and reflections are included throughout the book to aid you in the development of reflective practice: to help you examine your own habits and routines and to question previously unquestioned assumptions. Chapters in the first part of the book provide a theoretical underpinning for the more practical chapters that follow. Although I am a bit apprehensive using the word "theory," I trust that readers will find these chapters equally compelling and thought provoking. In the second part of the book, we apply theories in practice, adding further insight to our understanding of the various digital communication channels.

A general overview of the remaining chapters is as follows:

- Chapter 2 is concerned with underlying language and communication theories: We look at the role of language in professional encounters and provide the background necessary to appreciate the complexity of digital workplace interactions.
- In Chapter 3, we take a much closer look at language, examining how the smallest cues can become meaningful and important in communication. We also address three distinctive aspects of digital writing and consider a framework that enables us to successfully decode online messages.
- In Chapter 4, we zoom out to explore the arenas of digital writing. We revisit professional communication and take a closer look at virtual work and the factors that contribute to the changing landscape of corporate communication.
- Chapter 5 is devoted to e-mails: what makes e-mail communication unique and how it affects communication conventions. By drawing on our previously acquired knowledge of online writing, we explore problematic e-mail exchanges, issues related to sending time, style, formality, and copying.

- Chapter 6 is about instant messaging. We examine how the communication mode differs from others and is producing its own norms, including the use of emoticons.
- Chapter 7 explores the three factors that have the greatest effect on the changing landscape of corporate communications. Informed by the "honeycomb-theory"[9] we discuss the functionalities of social media and how these affect communication and language. We also discuss what it means to be "conversational" and how to achieve it.
- Finally, in Chapter 8, we revisit the relationship between theory and practice. We explore how our newly acquired knowledge can turn us into effective communicators and enable us to continue in our exploration of the language for digital communication.

CHAPTER 2

Professional Communication Online

As we have already seen, communication is very complex. In professional contexts, the possible tangible outcomes further increase this complexity, for instance when the success of a deal or trust of a customer is at stake. Put all that into a digital environment, and you get an extremely complex situation in which people are prone to miscommunicate, misunderstand each other, and form wrong impressions.

Despite these pitfalls, digitally mediated communication now plays a vital role in virtually all workplaces. E-mail is now central to white-collar work, instant messaging and chat have become popular tools for interacting with customers, and constant interactivity through social media or websites is now essential for the success of a business or organization. And even though other technologies allow us to communicate through video and audio, studies show that channels that only allow for text-based communication continue to rise in popularity.[1]

In this chapter, we explore the subtleties of text-based digital professional communication. The chapter introduces background ideas, exploring why professional communication warrants special attention and how it differs from communication in general. We briefly look at the role of language and then relocate to the digital realm to explore how communication changes over digital channels.

The Nature of Business and Professional Communication

Business communication expert Bargiela-Chiappini points out that communication at work is "not an end to itself" because there is always an underlying business purpose or objective participants want to achieve as a result of their interaction.[2] This does not mean, of course, that every single word we utter or write has a business purpose. A high proportion of our communication is task related and has a clear work objective, but we also often talk about nontask-related topics and engage in small talk or office gossip.

However, whether task related or not, the key concept to remember from Bargiela-Chiappini's observation is the notion of "underlying objectives." Almost every instance of communication has more than one layer of meaning. In professional settings, communicators simultaneously pursue a number of objectives. These might include:

- Accomplishing work processes, such as requesting information, giving information to others, clarifying, negotiating, and delegating tasks;
- Communicating our personal intentions, such as friendliness or collegiality to establish and maintain interpersonal relations;
- Demonstrating who we are in the organizational hierarchy by using a language that is representative of our position;
- Managing and motivating people;
- Expressing solidarity and reinforcing group identity;
- Learning about and creating the workplace culture, through our language use and vocabulary, and through discussions about what is acceptable and what is not.

Balancing these goals is not a straightforward task. The tension between getting a job done and maintaining a friendly, collegial relationship can be particularly tricky and requires sophisticated communication skills. In their book on power and politeness at work, Holmes and Stubbe point out:

> Underlying every interaction (…) is the delicate balance between the pressure to get the job done well and efficiently on the one hand, and affective considerations of collegiality and concern for people's feelings, i.e. politeness, on the other.[3]

Thus, giving directives, asking a favor of a colleague, and trying to get a superior to do something require a crafting of messages. An appropriate choice of communication media and careful language choices are necessary to achieve these complex, and sometimes conflicting, goals.

Language is a crucial part of this craft, as we saw in the e-mail examples in Chapter 1. The task, the purpose, the audience, and other contextual details might have had an effect on the linguistic (and even nonlinguistic) choices made in the e-mail messages. When asking the team members to submit their ideas in Task 1.1, Jim's linguistic strategies ranged from implied directives, such as "I need your ideas," to the less threatening and less direct "I invite all members to give me their ideas." The variation might reflect his relationship with the addressees, his power, and his position in the organizational hierarchy.

A strong relationship exists between language and the context in which it occurs. Linguistic forms are influenced by the goals people aim to achieve in communication as well as other contextual factors, such as background knowledge of the audience and our relationship to them. Of course, the linguistic choices people make when they communicate, such as the use of specific grammatical structures or words, might not always be conscious. But conscious or unconscious, these choices are very important when people try to make sense of heard or read messages. Language becomes the most important source of meaning making.

The Language of Business and Professional Communication

Language is a crucial—if not the most important—building block of our communication. It is also a fundamental part of the life of a business or organization, both in terms of internal operations and external competition. But we often forget how significant language is—possibly because it is such an ingrained part of our everyday lives.

The highly important and complex role of language is perhaps best illustrated using Guy Cook's windowpane analogy: The language we use is similar to the glass in the window. It allows us to see the world—and thus reality—through it, but since it does not get in the way of our attention, we look through it instead of focusing on the glass itself. Language, like the windowpane, is transparent. When people communicate, they focus on what is said, rather than how it is said. Language, the medium that transfers the content, goes unnoticed. But just like the glass sheet, language can blur, distort, or block out what we see as reality, as Cook argues:

> We may even begin to feel that there is no clear division between the window and the world beyond, and although there is an independent reality talked about, the particular window which someone has placed in front of us is creating the world we see, rather than simply providing access to it.[4]

Cook's analogy draws attention to the fact that language does not simply reflect reality—it actually defines it. The language we use when we construct our messages affects the interpretation of them.

We return again to Jim's e-mails we examined in the previous chapter, especially his way of talking about the issue at hand. In e-mail A he says: "How can we shut up those guys so the rest of us can talk?" and in e-mail D he talks about "the problem that has come to my attention about not hearing from all of our team members during our weekly telephone conferences."

On the surface, perhaps, the only difference in the messages is the level of formality and the tone. But further examination reveals that the grammatical structure and the terminology actively contribute to meaning—particularly whom Jim blames for the problem his group is experiencing. In e-mail A, Jim makes "those guys" (i.e., the ones who do not let the rest talk) the object of a question. The e-mail implicates them as the cause of the problem. In e-mail D, the language Jim uses implies that the problem could have been caused by several factors. It might be technological or it might be the lack of participation from the "quiet team members." The way in which reality is presented through Jim's personal "glass pane" will have an impact on how team members define the problem and whom they blame for it. In such situations, as Thompson warns, it is not surprising that the use of terminology that reflects guilt or blame actually generates feelings of guilt in the people concerned.[5]

Jim's example has shown us that language clearly forms and constitutes reality. There are two implications of this observation. First, this approach suggests that, by focusing on the "glass sheet" of language—by examining language in use—it is possible to learn about the intended reality, both the content as well as the range of underlying intentions. The second reason for the increased need to focus on the language and how it is used stems from the technicalities of digital communication technology. When people communicate online in writing, they do not share the same physical environment. They do not see or hear each other and have to achieve all their understanding through language and linguistic exchanges. The relative significance of words and other writing devices is greatly increased under these circumstances; so language plays an even more crucial part in meaning making than in face-to-face encounters.

Digitally Mediated Professional Communication

The lack of a shared physical context in text-based communications leads to participants not being able to rely on signals, such as tone of voice, gestures, or gaze to make their meaning clear. Not surprisingly, a major survey on working virtually, conducted in the United States with the participation of numerous organizations, concluded that the most challenging aspect of virtual work was the inability to convey or read nonverbal cues, with 98 percent of people agreeing that it is challenging to some extent. Refer to Figure 2.1 for a summary of other reported challenges.[6]

Nonverbal signals are extremely important during face-to-face communication. Facial expressions, tone of voice, and other nonverbal behaviors give speakers and listeners information they can use to regulate, modify, and control communication. One of the most important instances in which nonverbal signals control and regulate communication is when they are produced by the listener—a process known as *backchanneling*. This includes, for example, the *uh-uhs*, the hmms, the nods, or the puzzled looks we give out when listening. We provide backchannel signals as spontaneous and immediate responses to the ongoing interaction. Nodding vigorously may be taken by the speaker as a signal to keep talking, whereas a puzzled look is likely to work as a warning sign to the speaker that the message was not understood and needs modification.

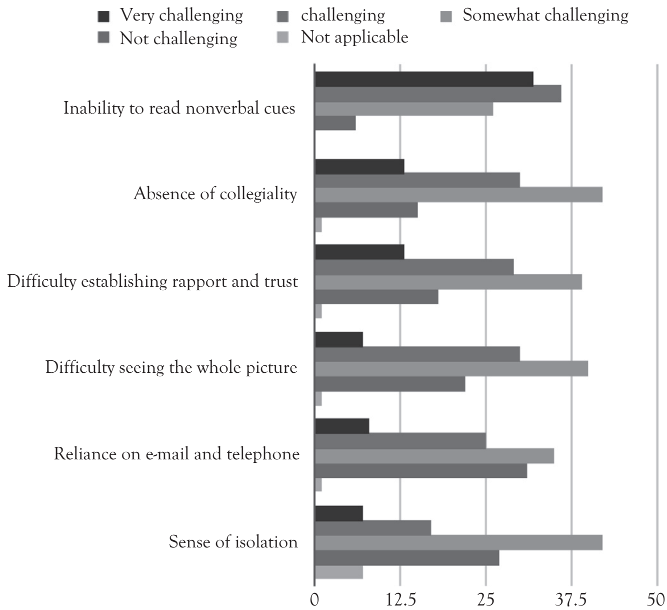

Figure 2.1 Virtual challenges faced by people working online

Source: Adapted from the RW3 Cultural Wizards report.

In computer-mediated communication, people construct their messages apart from their intended audiences: The writing takes place in a different space and at a different time to the reading. Even when a messaging application shows that a message is being constructed, for example, by displaying a small moving pencil on the screen, readers are still unable to see the complete message until it has been sent. Backchannel signals, therefore, cannot be used as a reaction to the message that is being constructed.

REFLECTION 2.1

In face-to-face interactions, speakers align their message "on the go" based on the nonverbal backchannel signals they receive from their audience. Imagine you are chatting face-to-face with a colleague about a new member of staff. As you speak, you notice that your colleague is looking above your shoulder as if seeing someone approach and very slightly shaking her head. Do you continue talking? If not, why not?

The second most important function of nonverbal signaling occurs when it is produced along with (or instead of) the verbal message to signal how exactly the message in question should be understood. Nonverbal signals can clarify, emphasize, complement, or repeat, but also contradict verbal messages. Audio signals and paralanguage (such as tone of voice, pitch, rhythm, pause, or loudness) play a crucial part in this, but facial expressions and body language are also extensively used.

Thus, nonverbal communication is almost exclusively based on visual or audio signals. These signals, naturally, are nonexistent in text-based digital communication. As computer-mediated communication has developed, people frequently use creative alternatives for these missing signals. Emoticons, exaggerated or unconventional spelling or punctuations (ahhh, ?!!?, I _mean_ this), capital letters, and other symbols are used as means to fill the gap. Recent research shows that the repertoire of such expressions is rather extensive and works relatively well in some settings.

But such a system of symbols and expressions only really works if the meaning of this set of resources is conventionalized, that is, understood by everyone involved. Unfortunately, that is not the case at the moment. People have different rules for expressing various intentions, and it is often very difficult to decide what exactly is meant and how words and nonverbal cues should be interpreted. A smiley, allegedly the most regularly used cue, for instance, can be confusing—especially in professional encounters. For one person, it might signal friendly intent,

TASK 2.1

Why do you think the "speakers" used a smiley in the IM log in lines 1 and 4? Think of more than one possible reason (real-life data from a virtual team).

1. Andrew | 03:44 pm | I'm on a semi-leave tomorrow and will be working from home ... call me on my cell if you need anything :)
2. Kristie | 03:47 pm | Thanks. I hope you caught up with your rest well.
3. Andrew | 03:47 pm | I haven't, but I hope to do so tomorrow.
4. Kristie | 03:50 pm | Must :) OK?

but for someone else, it might imply that the message should be read in an ironic way (for further examples of the range of emoticon functions see Skovholt's study).[7]

As illustrated, although people try to use a range of signals to replace or replicate nonverbal signaling, the way in which these signals are interpreted depends mostly on the reader and not the intention of the writer. Readers rely nearly exclusively on their own vantage point to make assumptions about what others mean. The main issue with such an approach is that reader perception is not the objective—it is heavily influenced by previous experiences and social circumstances such as age, gender, and education, as well as a range of other factors such as the time at which the message was received or the relationship between the author and the recipient.[8]

In Task 2.1, for example, the "meaning" of both smileys would change considerably depending on whether Andrew or Kirstie is the manager. If Andrew is superior to Kirstie, Andrew's smiley could be read as encouragement or the signaling of collegiality and friendly intent. In this case, Kirstie's smiley is a sign of friendly banter or teasing because it appears along with a very strong directive that one would not normally expect an employee to say to her manager. But if Kirstie is the boss here, Andrew's smile could function to soften the news that he will be working from home, almost in an apologetic way, while Kirstie's smiley could function as a way to lower the force of her directive. This example shows that no matter how well known or widely used a nonverbal cue is, its interpretation depends on the actual context of use.

We really need to ask, then, if the nonverbal signals that are so crucial for successful communication can be used efficiently in writing. If so, how can we ensure that they are interpreted correctly? We will explore these issues further in Chapter 3.

Lessons Learned

In this chapter, our main focus was breaking down the complexities of online professional communication and examining what actually happens in professional interactions. Additionally, we examined the practical implications of this understanding for the improvement of digital professional communication. The main cause of the complexity in this process is the interplay between the professional goal orientation of a workplace, the language and language use, as well as the digital communicative environment.

We have seen that in professional or business encounters, communicators pursue a range of goals related to the task to be completed, the representation of their power and position in the organizational hierarchy, and the establishment and maintenance of group identity, culture, and interpersonal relationships. These layers of task-related and interpersonal communications often occur concurrently, though the balancing of the various goals might pose challenges for the communicators.

The way people formulate their messages through their language use plays a crucial part in how their messages and communicative intentions are perceived. The windowpane analogy demonstrates the formative and constitutive power of language, and in the digital realm it is specifically the language that carries the weight of the message during construction and interpretation.

One of the greatest challenges of text-based communication is the lack of a shared physical environment, and of auditory and visual information. Nonverbal communication is crucial in spoken interactions, and as digital communication has increased, people have invented a range of strategies and cues to inscribe nonverbal meaning into their writing. However, we have also seen that these strategies and devices can at times be problematic: Their meaning is not necessarily conventionalized or universally understood. In the next chapter, we will look more closely at how people make sense of communication with the help of "contextualization cues." We will examine a technique that enables us to explore how these cues work in computer-mediated communication and apply our understanding to samples of real-life texts from professional settings.

CHAPTER 3

How (Not) to Use Keystrokes

In the previous chapter, we looked at the various functions of communication and made a distinction between the actual content of our words (or in other words the *transactional* messages) and the underlying, hidden messages related to power, identity, hierarchy, and intention (which we might call *meta* messages or *relational* messages). We have seen that nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in how we make sense of these "meta" messages, and we have concluded that it is perhaps the lack of these cues that makes written digital interaction problematic at times. In this chapter, we dig deeper to consider exactly how we make sense of cues that signal "meta" messages, and we learn about a method that could help us understand better how this signaling can work in digital contexts.

How Do We Make Sense of (Meta) Communication?

In a face-to-face interaction, the receiver of a message (listener) relies on a wide range of cues to make sense of subtle layers of communication. The cues start with the types of words the speaker chooses in a particular context, and the sentence structure he employs, but extend to the volume of his voice, intonation, and stress, as well as nonverbal communication including facial expressions and gestures.

All these factors contribute to how the listener makes sense of what has been said. To be able to interpret all this information properly in a specific situation and, perhaps more importantly, to be able to communicate effectively and appropriately ourselves, we need to be regularly exposed to the communication traditions of the people we would encounter in that situation.

A famous example of this problem comes from research by linguistic anthropologist John Gumperz in the cafeteria of a major British airport.[1] While he was conducting research there, the customers—most of whom were white British people—repeatedly described the staff—who were mainly Indian and Pakistani women—as uncooperative and surly. Gumperz realized that although the staff and customers exchanged only a limited number of words every day, it was the manner in which they were spoken that resulted in a negative evaluation of the interactions. The staff members asked the customers if they wanted gravy with their meal by saying gravy, in an intonation with falling contour. For British customers, however, this did not sound as an offer, but rather, a statement. According to British expectations, a polite question would have included a questioning tone, as in *Would you like some gravy?* Tension arose as a result of the different conventions of the two varieties of English in this case. The two groups had very clear but very distinct understandings of what falling intonation indicated when the word gravy was spoken. In Indian English, it was an offer but in British English it was a direct and surly statement.

Learning from this case, Gumperz pointed out that when people communicate, they use a wide range of cues that serve as signals to help them make sense of the words, like the intonation in the previous example. He called these signals "contextualization" cues, because, as he pointed out, they work to assist the speakers in making a judgment about the most likely interpretation of their message in a given situation.

> CONTEXTUALIZATION CUE: a "nudge" that helps you to interpret the right meaning of the message. Like saying "I really love her haircut" accompanied with a wink—to signal that this is not really a sincere compliment.

Of course, learning what works as a contextualization cue and what it means when you use it are not simple tasks. These cues do not have meaning on their own—they only become meaningful in a given context or in a specific moment as the conversation unfolds. The possibilities are endless. Almost anything can become a contextualization cue, including the type of words people choose, whether they choose to talk in a formal or informal style, the loudness of their voice, or the nonverbal signals they send when they talk face-to-face.

For example, as a child when my parents used my full name instead of my first name, I knew all too well that they were signaling frustration with me. The sound of my full name was a clear indication that I should act urgently on whatever was expected from me. I also know that when my best friend winks while telling a story, she is about to reveal a compromising detail. Or when I receive a message from my line manager that ends in an overtly formal greeting, I become anxious, because I tend to interpret her change of style as a signal of her dissatisfaction.

The problem with contextualization cues is that very often we are not even aware of their existence and therefore do not realize how significant they are in communication—especially if we talk to people we do not know. The danger of this lack of awareness is that we might not react to the signals or might read them incorrectly. As a result, we could interpret a message entirely differently from how it was originally intended. That is when miscommunication, misunderstanding, and interpersonal conflict can occur—just as it did in the case of the airport cafeteria.

The main source of such conflict lies in the fact that when people miss a contextualization cue or misinterpret its meaning, the failure is often attributed to personality or attitude. "The speaker is judged as unfriendly, impertinent, rude, uncooperative, or to fail to understand," as Gumperz observes. "Miscommunication of this type … is regarded as a social *faux pas* and leads to misjudgments of the speaker's intent; it is not likely to be identified as a mere linguistic error."[2] Apart from the specific breakdown in communication such miscues cause, such judgments might have more serious, wider ranging consequences, such as causing racial or ethnic stereotypes to develop or deepening the divide between hierarchical statuses—as we saw in the case described previously.

It is clear therefore that learning to use and read contextualization cues is critical if our communication is to be successful. This is no easy task though, since contextualization cues can come at you thick and fast during conversation. The way people traditionally learn what these cues mean or do is through long periods of close personal contact in families, friendships, and at school and work—in groups of people who share background knowledge and who can be confident that others will read their indirect allusions correctly. And, of course, even if there is tension due to someone reading a cue in the wrong way, personal, face-to-face contact allows people to check the meaning and intention on the spot. Imagine, for example, that while telling your colleague an incredible story, he starts to shake his head. You wonder for a moment whether he disapproves of what you were saying, but then he goes on to exclaim "No waaaay!" The headshake is instantly clarified as a sign of disbelief, sympathy, or deep involvement in the story when coupled with the verbal response.

We have seen so far that contextualization cues are typically automatically learned and used. They are rarely consciously noted and have no easily describable assigned meaning; yet they are essential in signaling how the content or intention of a message should be understood. We have also noted that in spoken interactions, people at least have an opportunity to question, check, or clarify the meaning of signals, even if they still sometimes get it wrong. But what happens when we interact with people we do not know, with whom we have no communication history or shared background knowledge? And what if that interaction takes place in the digital environment where the lack of face-to-face contact does not allow for on-the-go clarifications? Do these crucial signals exist in writing at all, and how do we make sense of them?

In the remainder of the chapter we will explore the factors that influence how we read digital messages and show a technique to expose and learn how contextualization is done in writing.

Three Aspects of Digital Writing

In Chapter 2 we saw that one of the most problematic aspects of digital communication is the lack of audiovisual cues. But we have also seen that people have devised a wide range of strategies to replicate or imbed these cues into their writing, for example, by adding emoticons, or using unconventional spelling, punctuation, capital letters, and other symbols. But how exactly do these techniques work in the digital realm as contextualization cues and what exactly do they mean? This is what we really need to focus on to understand how we can improve our own communication.

A recent personal exchange I had with Janet (a senior colleague) demonstrates the different ways in which online strategies can be interpreted. Last term, Janet was trying to send me an attachment that had been saved in a relatively old version of the software our institution had been using. I responded to her message requesting a newer version of the document, as I was unable to open the attachment. In her reply, she sent me an attachment saved in exactly the same format as the previous one—the one I could not open. As a response, I sent her the following e-mail:

> Dear Janet,
> as I said before, I am unable to open excel files saved in a version earlier than 97. I could not open the attachment of the previous letter and I cannot open these new ones. Is there any way for you to save this in a more up-to-date version, please??

A few days later, I bumped into Janet who stopped me in the corridor and confronted me about my "very rude" e-mail. Puzzled, I returned to my office and opened the message straight away to check the source of my "rudeness." As far as I was concerned, I included all the necessary formulaic niceties, and although "as I said before" might have sounded impatient, I felt that my message was respectful and professional.

Puzzled, I showed my e-mail to some students. They unanimously agreed that it was the double question marks that made my message seem rude. I had not even paid attention to these two question marks because they were nothing but a typo—I held the "?" key longer than intended and, in a hurry, forgot to proofread the message before sending.

Three very important lessons can be learned from this story: They refer to the issue of intentionality in digital writing, the negativity effect, and the role of power in business communication.

Intentionality

In digital writing, the basic understanding is that whatever we put on paper (or on the screen) is intentional. Even nonverbal cues, which might happen unintentionally in face-to-face interactions, have to be consciously typed. All the signs we type are self-motivated: We use them with a specific reason. As early as 1995, Marvin pointed this out with reference to the use of smileys. In face-to-face contexts, smiles can be strategic or spontaneous and unintentional, but in the digital realm "every smile must be consciously indicated. In private, something flowing across the computer screen might cause a participant to spontaneously smile, but a conscious choice must be made to type it out; a participant might frown at the keyboard … but strategically decide to type a strategic smile."[3]

Since electronic writing, like any other type of writing, can be checked, proofread, edited, and modified, grammatical and spelling errors could also be viewed as intentional. They might be taken as either having a meaning or having a purpose. Some researchers believe that the speed and spontaneity with which e-mails can be written and sent deter people from checking and reflecting on their writing, but the resulting errors might not necessarily disrupt the communicative process.[4] However, research has shown that language errors in digital communication frequently lead to the wrong impression being formed. In professional contexts in particular they can be interpreted as signs of a lack of interest, lack of professionalism, or lack of respect on the part of the sender, rather than the sign of spontaneity.[5]

In the case of my e-mail to Janet, she apparently attributed intentional meaning to the double question marks at the end of my message, and perceived a much more negative tone than I had intended. This realization leads us to the second important characteristic of text-based digital communication: the negativity effect.

REFLECTION 3.1

What else in the e-mail above might be perceived as rudeness? Is the message impolite or disrespectful or is impatience implied in another way?

Negativity Effect

The negativity effect refers to the fact that receivers are likely to interpret digitally mediated, text-based messages as being more negative than the sender intended. As Byron noted about e-mails, "the ambiguity of emotional tone in emails makes the negativity effect likely by increasing the salience of any negative information."[6]

The negativity effect has been detected across all communicative technologies, be it social media interactions, private e-mails, or instant messaging. Academic research has shown that any negative aspect of a message—be it verbal or graphic—shifts the interpretation of the message toward the negative.[7] This means that if a message contains even the smallest device that is negatively balanced, it is likely that the intention behind the message will be seen as negative by the reader.

To demonstrate the force of the negativity effect, Deborah Tannen analyzed enthusiasm markers in instant messaging—techniques that are intended to convey enthusiasm, such as multiple punctuation marks (!!!!), ALL CAPS (ENTIRE week), and elongated letters (soooooo). She found that the young women she studied used these symbols not to signal enthusiasm, but to avoid being judged negatively or to avoid the impression of apathy.[8] This discovery proves that, in certain situations, overt written enthusiasm is the "norm," the accepted or even expected way of communicating. It is the absence of these enthusiasm markers that carry a special meaning (see REFLECTION 3.2).

REFLECTION 3.2

Do you ever find yourself reflecting on the wording of an e-mail (Such as "Regards" in Figure 3.1), wondering about the other person's intentions? Have you ever then realized that you misread the intention, and the sender was not in fact angry or upset? Or have you ever assumed the opposite and evaluated a message as more positive than it was intended?

Figure 3.1 E-mail confusion

The negativity effect can be further amplified if any aspect of the interaction violates the addressee's expectations. If something differs from how we expect it to happen (be it the level of formality, the use of vocabulary, or the choice of communication channel), our attention to contextualization cues heightens.

This is, of course, commonsense—we are trying to understand and evaluate why the interaction was different from what we expected. And since there is no immediate feedback from the other party in digital communication, people look for any available cue that would help them confirm whether their guess about intention was wrong or right. That might be the choice of words, as in the "Very British Problems" example in Figure 3.2, or less overt signals, like the time of day the message was sent. Seeing an e-mail message popping up at midnight from the boss would make lots of people feel uneasy even without opening the message. It is the actual timing of the message that people interpret as information about the urgency of a task.

To make things even more complicated, the sense-making process is also very often influenced by our familiarity with the person with whom we are communicating. For instance, if a manager is normally very friendly and informal with her staff but then sends an e-mail written in a reserved, formal tone, the recipients might wonder what caused the change. The fact that the change in tone violates the previous pattern of communication, together with the negativity effect typical of digitally mediated interactions, might well result in a negative interpretation of the tone of the message. Staff members would begin to wonder if the manager was dissatisfied with them or their work.

In my message to Janet, the negativity effect in my example meant that in spite of my repeated attempts to convey my "respect" through linguistic politeness strategies (such as the formulation of my proposal as a question "is there any way?" instead of a request "Can you?" as well as

> Dear Janet,
>
> as I said before, I am unable to open excel files saved in a version earlier than 97. I could not open the attachment of the previous letter and I cannot open these new ones. Is there any way for you to save this in a more up-to-date version, please??

Figure 3.2 Identifying the nonverbal cues in an e-mail

the formulaic politeness marker "please") the double question marks had a greater impact and the whole message ended up sounding negative and rude.

Power and Identity

In the e-mail exchange between Janet and me, there is another set of factors at play—the different roles each of us held within our organization. We have seen that professional communication is always multilayered, and the specific content of the messages is always intertwined with other functions of communication, such as considerations for the other person's feelings, the signaling of one's position within the group or hierarchy, or the display of cultural or interactional norms. In institutional settings, questions are thought to be central vehicles for constructing social worlds and reflecting existing ones.[9] This means that the type of questions people ask and the answers people produce reflect the culture and norms of the organization. They also reflect the relationship between the participants.

This is, in many ways, self-evident. The questions a potential buyer asks a salesperson differ considerably from the questions a chief executive officer (CEO) poses during the annual budget meeting, and the answers are equally different. But this difference manifests itself both at the content level—what the questions and answers are about—and at the level of how the people relate to one another. Question–answer pairs are considered to be a form of social action, and, as we saw previously, they reflect the norms and values of the institution within which they occur as well as the identities of the people interacting.

When I e-mailed Janet, I was communicating with someone higher up the institutional hierarchy. The question in the e-mail is only really a question on the surface. It appears to seek information about Janet's ability to save a document in a different format. Below the surface, however, it achieves the complex communicative functions of a request directed at a superior. I did not want Janet to tell me about whether she could reformat the document—I wanted her to actually do it. But as she is my superior, it would be unacceptable to give her an overt direction. Getting the "boss" to cooperate is often no easy task. As Holmes and Stubbe point out, we need to finely balance our understanding of our own and our boss's hierarchical position (and things that come with it, like our duties and rights) with politeness considerations.[10]

Following this train of thought, if Janet interpreted every aspect of my message (including the '??'s) as intentional and viewed some of the elements in the message as more negative than I intended, it is not hard to see why she was disgruntled. In her interpretation, my message failed to signal the appropriate level of respect that I, as someone on a lower tier of the organizational hierarchy, would be expected to use when requesting her cooperation. For Janet, my message really was rude.

The DEANEX Method

The idea of intentionality, the negativity effect, and power at work should always be considered when we produce, read, or analyze text-based computer-mediated communications. The DEANEX method helps us to understand the specific interpretations people make when they receive communications and what they base these judgments on. It enables us to consider which linguistic and nonverbal signs combine to make meaning. And, in relation to my e-mail to Janet, it can show how I might have known that my message could cause distress.

I started to think about these issues several years ago while teaching one of my professional communication courses. While discussing the communicative functions that can be achieved in a piece of text, I realized that students found it difficult to identify the relevant parts of the text and talk about them. This was partly because they lacked the toolkit for naming and talking about the phenomena, but also because they never really had to look closely at the elements of a text, so they did not know what to look for.

To address both these problems, I developed the DEANEX method (and gave it this catchy title to help in recalling it).[11] It is based on very close, interpretative observation of real-life examples and uses language-analytical methodologies from the academic disciplines of discourse studies and linguistics. But you do not have to be an expert linguist or a communication scholar to use it.

By reflecting on examples, we can raise our level of awareness of how our language choices shape meaning and affect our interpersonal relations or give certain impressions. We can then reflect on how these communication practices might affect collaboration, productivity, or the effectiveness of the messages we send.

DEANEX consists of three stages. It is based on the *deconstruction*, *analysis*, *and explanation* of natural data samples and texts.

Deconstruction

The first stage involves deconstructing the message to find its smallest elements. It is a process of zooming in on the language of a message to identify a particular cue, sign, strategy, or element that might affect how the message is read. Typically, we are looking for things that affect the meaning and interpretation of the verbal content, nonverbal cues, writing strategies, or more complex elements such as "tone."

We can again use my e-mail to my colleague Janet as an example here, focusing in particular on the double question marks.

As you can see, during the first stage, we are looking for cues that might have an important communicative function in the digital text—elements that affect the verbal meaning of the messages.

Analysis

The second stage—the analysis—is the process of exposing the function or the role of the cue. This process is deceptively simple: We contrast the original version of the text with an edited version. The edit can be either removing the cue or replacing it with another cue or strategy. By considering how the message has changed without that one element, we can identify the function it achieved when it was there, including the hidden layers of meaning it contained.

As you can see, I have removed one question mark from my manipulated version. The edit, of course, can be done differently. You might want to try ending the message with a full stop or, as often happens in e-mail communication, without any punctuation at all.

Edited version:

> Dear Janet,
> as I said before, I am unable to open excel files saved in a version earlier than 97. I could not open the attachment of the previous letter and I cannot open these new ones. Is there any way for you to save this in a more up-to-date version, please?

Explanation

Once we have an edited version of the text, we compare the two versions. Read the original and the edited versions and see how they make you feel. Can you explain how the additional question mark affected your interpretation of the purpose of the sentence or the whole message?

The DEANEX method will be used and referred to throughout the book, with further examples for analysis supplied later. The following practice exercise in Case Study 3.1 gives you an opportunity to try out the three stages of the DEANEX method. It features a corporate communication example from Twitter.

> The stages of the DEANEX method
>
> 1. Deconstruction: Look for cues (verbal or nonverbal) that might have an important communicative function in the digital text—elements that affect the verbal meaning of the messages.
> 2. Analysis: Edit the identified cue, for example, by contrasting a version of the text that includes the cue with a version that does not.
> 3. Explanation: Identify what the cue in question does in the text—how it changes the communicative function, both in terms of the content and the communication of interpersonal intent or the communication of identity.

Case Study: 3.1 Applying the DEANEX Model to a Twitter Message

Read the following message below and identify the element that adds an additional layer of meaning to the pop-up message. Why do you think Twitter formatted the message like this?

Use the DEANEX method to manipulate the original message and compare and contrast the two versions to expose the various meanings.

Have you come across other examples of corporate communication with similar strategies?

From Theory to Practice

By now, I hope it is clear that we need to keep reminding ourselves about one of the greatest pitfalls of communication. “Meaning” is not single dimensional, consistent, or coherent. It is paramount to keep this concept in mind because it has significant implications for business professionals. Strategies cannot be implemented, work processes cannot be agreed on, and business goals cannot be achieved unless the stakeholders involved understand communication correctly and interpret messages in the way they were intended.

The examples quoted previously attest to the fact that—as Czerniawska put it—the “link between language and action is not a direct one.”[12] The most important lesson, perhaps, is that readers of digital texts might take into consideration every aspect of the written message when they make sense of both the content and the relational intent. They take in the words, grammar, punctuation, and the range of cues used for the inscription of nonverbal signs.

In this chapter, we have seen that three particular aspects of communication have a great effect on how readers make sense of messages on the screen: People tend to assign intentionality to everything they see in digital messages, the negativity effect makes readers interpret messages in a certain light, and the interpersonal interactions at play affect their response. Understanding that these phenomena influence interpretation leads to the realization that if people aim to become better communicators, they have to develop a higher level or awareness of exactly how meaning making happens when people interact.

This kind of awareness is particularly pressing in the digital realm, as things people might assign meaning to—what we might call "out of awareness"[13] features—are things we might not, at first glance, identify as crucial or immensely meaningful. Just think about the double question marks example to grasp this problem in action.

The idea of developing a high level of communication awareness as a way of improving communication skills is, of course, not new. There are two ways to do it, as Thompson explains:

> First, we can adopt a more conscious or reflective approach to our interactions—that is, we concentrate very hard on developing our knowledge and skills as we go about our interactions. This may be difficult and labored at first but should get easier over time. To complement this process, we can also develop our level of awareness by becoming more observant of interactions between people.[14]

The DEANEX method introduced in this chapter enables us to improve in both ways. It allows us to observe and analyze messages crafted by others and develop our understanding of how language works in digital contexts.

We started the chapter with the story of the researcher who studied the British airport workers; so it might be appropriate to finish it with his thoughts. When talking about how people learn to "read" and appropriately produce contextualization cues, Gumperz said: "Typically immigrant groups who enter a new language environment may become quite fluent in basic grammar although they map the contextualization conventions of their own native society onto their conversational practice in the host language."[15] This strategy, as Gumperz implies, is not always beneficial, as we saw in the story of the cafeteria staff: Contextualization conventions are specific to cultures and groups.

Putting this into the context of digital communication, let us extend this analogy and think about ourselves as "immigrants" in the digital realm. During the process of our socialization, we pick up the rules of how to interact via the various communication technologies, and implicitly or explicitly acquire the norms and conventions accepted within a particular group. But we learn the more obvious things first, such as what to put in the subject line of the e-mail or what a smiley is. The "beyond awareness" layers—the subtle, often invisible cues—take the longest to acquire.

The DEANEX method helps to speed up this process by letting us focus on the small things that help us achieve mutual understanding in digital writing. By digging down to the smallest elements of a written text, we can expose how people assign meaning to the timing of a message, how a simple punctuation mark can influence our perception of the intention of a message, or how, as in the case of the Twitter pop-up message, the written "hmm" can soften the directness of bad news.

In the next chapter, we will focus on why it is crucial in professional contexts to be aware of and understand the subtleties of communication, both when people interact within an organization and when an organization talks to stakeholders externally.

CHAPTER 4

Arenas of Digital Writing

Communication in modern organizations can be exceedingly complex. Even relatively small businesses can involve a surprisingly high number of stakeholders both internally and externally, including employees, management, shareholders, suppliers, customers, and the press. The communication between these parties takes place via a great variety of communication channels, and in recent years digital communication has become one of the most prominent modes of both corporate communication and interpersonal interaction.

This chapter provides a brief overview of the role digital communication plays in the internal and external communications of a modern organization and looks at how the traditional roles and boundaries of professional communication are becoming blurred. To understand and appreciate the complex nature of digital writing and its crucial role in organizations, it is essential to get an insight into the communication ecology of the 21st-century workplace.

The Rethinking of Professional Communication

Communication in organizations is traditionally divided into two well-defined areas: internal and external communication. Internal communication happens within the organization. At the lowest level, it occurs between colleagues sharing an office or bumping into each other by the photocopier. On a larger scale, it occurs during team meetings, or, if we zoom even further out to the level of the organization, internal communication occurs between the management and employees or between various departments and teams.

In the traditional sense of the word, external communication happens between the organization and the outside world: investors, suppliers, prospective employees, media, governments, and—naturally—the customers or clients. While these categories have historically been clearly distinct, in recent years, the boundaries between the two have become blurred due to the influence of the Internet, as shown in Figure 4.1.

The internal and external sides now constantly inform and influence one another, and new ways of working have led to new ways of interacting. On social media, for example, companies are now expected to keep their communication channels open and engage in social conversations with their stakeholders. A similarly novel situation has been brought about by the popularity of personal blogs and microblogs: If these are maintained by employees who share information about their employers, their personal content can easily be associated with companies or organizations, and might lead to damaged reputation or the loss of trust. Another example of new ways of working and communicating is virtual work, when teams complete their daily tasks via computer-mediated communication channels.

Considering these new developments, it is not surprising that the ability to write effectively online has become an essential skill set in the eyes of many business professionals. From an external or corporate communication perspective, such skills are crucial for a competitive advantage. As Hulme puts it,

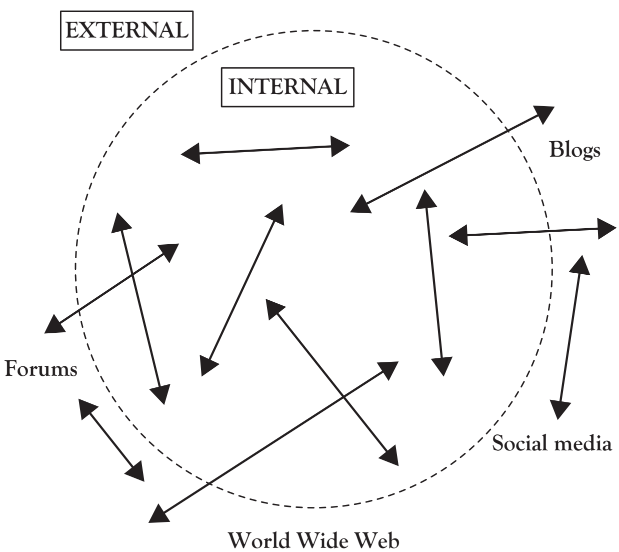

Figure 4.1 Impact of the Internet on organizational communication

> the pervasiveness of digital communication, and especially social media communication, means that business customers expect conversational, instantaneous interaction using digital channels, no matter where they are. The winners today will be those businesses with a clear understanding of these channels, and who develop their employees' language and digital skill sets to use them.[1]

In internal communication, "digital emotional literacy" (a term I borrowed from Edelson and colleagues)[2] is considered to be a set of skills that all organizations need to develop in their employees. This is partly because these skills are deemed to be crucial for disseminating information across the company, and also because these channels can be used to engage and motivate people to produce better results and serve as ambassadors for the brand when using personal or semiofficial online communication channels.

The question at the heart of this book is how we can obtain this skill set—what does it take to become an effective digital communicator? In previous chapters, we considered the theory of professional communication and adopted a language-centered view. But to get a fuller picture of how communication works, we now need to apply our knowledge to a workplace context. In the pages that follow, we will discuss internal communication and virtual work, as well as external communication, specifically from the point of view of changing norms and conventions. Corporate communication—and social media in particular—will then be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 7.

Internal Communication: What Does It Mean to Work Virtually?

When people use digital channels to interact within the workplace, the collaboration that takes place between them can be considered in some senses to be "virtual." Virtual work, in the broadest possible sense, refers to work environments where team members might be physically and/or temporarily separated for some or all of the duration of the collaboration, and work processes are mostly accomplished through digital communication.[3] These days, all types of office work are to some extent virtual. There are very few—if any—purely face-to-face work teams that do not use any sort of communication technology. As a result, training employees to have communication skills that enable them to communicate effectively in the digital realm should be of paramount importance to any organization.

The concept of virtualness and virtual work (or remote work or telecommuting) is extremely easy to define on one level. At another level, however, this definition is problematic, to say the least. Do people who work virtually know each other in person? What proportion of their communication takes place in the virtual realm? What forms of mediated communication would classify as remote working? These questions and the answers to them are important because they have implications for the quality of communication between the people involved. For example, consider a team that has been created to collaborate on a single project; the team members have no previous history, have never met in person, and are located in physically distant locations. The communication that takes place between them would be different from the communication that happens within a team that meets on a regular basis, shares the same building, and only occasionally uses mediated communication channels.

Despite their different circumstances, digital communication technologies such as e-mail and instant messaging (IM) can be used in both team situations; so they could be considered examples of virtual communication, irrespective of the relationship and communication history between team members Considering the fact that almost all workplaces now include an element of virtual work, it is the extent of virtualness that needs to be established. We can place "virtualness" along a continuum—on one end is the "highest level of virtualness," where there is a complete lack of a shared reality. On the other end is the occasional use of mediated technologies in an otherwise mainly face-to-face environment.

It is crucial to understand that familiarity between conversation partners, their communication history, and the existence of a well-defined organizational culture, or the lack of one, will have a considerable influence over how they use language, how they interpret messages, and how effectively they communicate with their colleagues.

REFLECTION 4.1

1. How "virtual" is your work? Where would you position your work environment on the continuum?
2. Is there a difference between how you write an e-mail to a colleague you have known for a long time and a new client you are contacting for the first time?

Virtual Team Communication

Remote work has become so popular in recent years that there is a high chance that 8 out of 10 readers regularly or occasionally work as a part of a virtual team. The growing success of virtual work is due to the confluence of organizational and technological factors. Virtual collaboration allows spatially and culturally unrestrained cooperation among organizations, teams, and individuals, particularly as shared online workspaces and video connectivity improve.

Businesses make considerable savings by bringing in virtual working too. They do not have to relocate employees and often save on bricks-and-mortar office costs. Furthermore, they can pick the right person for a given job, wherever they are based. For these reasons, telecommuting has become essential rather than optional for a large number of organizations.

So what makes a virtual team successful? Essentially, the answer is good communication:

> The effectiveness of virtual teams and resultant outcomes of virtual teamwork is dependent on the resolution of miscommunication and conflict, the development of adequate and competent roles within the team for working together, and facilitating good communication between team members.[4]

Of course, the nature of virtual work means that communication among team members is not straightforward. To start with, virtual teams have a wide range of communication technologies to choose from, including audio and video channels. These choices may have a significant impact on the effectiveness of a team. Interestingly, though, in spite of the wide scale of available audiovisual channels, two of the most popular communication technologies in the world of work are still text based: e-mail and IM.

The lack of personal contact and the reliance on text-based technologies to accomplish work tasks can lead to miscommunication, misunderstandings, and interpersonal conflict. If a team consists of colleagues with diverse personalities, backgrounds, expertise, and perspectives, they might not have a shared understanding of the norms and conventions of communication.

To further complicate the lack of shared understanding, there are limited opportunities to talk informally in the virtual realm. A team dispersed in various locations misses out on the corridor talk or water-cooler moments that become such an important part of regular office life. In traditional workplaces, the random chats between colleagues away from their workspace have a highly important function: They help colleagues create a "common background." This is how team members informally—and often implicitly—pass on the organizational culture and the unwritten rules that govern how things are done. Not having such a shared understanding might well be a recipe for disaster, resulting in serious financial and personal consequences, as in the case of Vicki Walker, described as follows.

Case Study 4.1: All Caps Misunderstood

Vicki Walker worked as an accountant in a New Zealand health agency. One Tuesday afternoon in 2007, she made a calamitous typing error that ultimately cost her that job. Consider the implications and consequences of her internal message:

The all-capped words appeared in blue text, with other parts of her e-mail written in bold black and red type. While this message may not be the most glowing example of the written word, writing an e-mail

Photo: A. Zirig

Please be advised that the final date and time for submitting your Sep07 staff claims is 4.30pm on Tuesday, 25 September 2007

Your staff claim will be paid on Friday, 28 September. Available in your bank account at midnight.

TO ENSURE YOUR STAFF CLAIM IS PROCESSED AND PAID, PLEASE FOLLOW THE CHECKLIST BELOW.

like this hardly seems a sackable offence, though that was precisely what happened to Walker. Her employer, ProCare, clearly placed a great emphasis on knowing when, and when not, to use all caps and color—though it did not have an e-mail etiquette guide when this particular employee indulged in a big, bright, upper-case splurge.

ProCare took great exception to Walker's e-mail and fired her, claiming that she had "caused disharmony in the workplace" by using block capitals, bold typeface, and red text in her e-mails.[5] Walker took legal action and had to remortgage her home to pay for it. She has said that the battle with her employer nearly ruined her life.

1. Drawing on your knowledge of contextualization cues and applying the DEANEX method, can you identify the range of functions the CAPITALIZATION of the text might fulfill?
2. Why do you think the company reaction was so extreme? How else could the case have been handled?

This case study shows what can happen if people do not have a shared understanding of what is acceptable and what is not in regard to communication norms. For Vicky, perhaps, using ALL CAPS in bold colors was simply a way of saying to her colleagues: Pay attention! This is important! But the consequences of her message demonstrate the force of *intentionality*, the *negativity effect*, and the *power balance*—the very issues we discussed in the previous chapter. Instead of focusing on the urgency of the message, her colleagues assigned different meaning to her cues, which led to what the press called "disharmony at the workplace." Perhaps most importantly, however, the example shows that in the virtual realm, people often miss out on crucial interpersonal and situational context cues that would otherwise aid in interaction and understanding. Colleagues could not gauge the implied intentions based on Vicki's tone of voice, volume, or facial expressions; so they fell back solely on the written cues—which, as we have seen, failed to convey the message she intended.

So what is it that is required for effective virtual communication—the type that does not result in breakdowns and interpersonal conflict and that leads to the successful accomplishment of work tasks? As we discussed earlier, a virtual team needs to have common ground—a shared understanding of how language is used and what the acceptable communication norms are between team members. Unfortunately, at many workplaces, there is no proper guidance for digital communication, and due to the technicalities of virtual collaboration, there are no informal chats and meetings that would allow people to negotiate and share rules and norms. Team members often have nowhere to create that all-important common ground. There are several points that should be remembered and important lessons that could be learned here:

1. The general norms and rules of digital writing are far from established, but providing team-specific guidelines can help colleagues navigate their way across digital interactions.
2. To communicate successfully, team members need to create common ground. This can be achieved either by allowing people to meet face-to-face or providing them with opportunities for digital "water cooler" talk: encouraging people to chat about nonwork-related things colleagues normally would around the watercooler or in the copier room.

3. In digital writing everything and anything can become meaningful. Gaining an awareness of the cues and strategies that can become meaningful and how they work is therefore an essential step in the journey toward effective virtual communication.

External Communication: When a Company Talks to Stakeholders

Despite the benefits of digital communication for putting people in touch with each other and getting things done within an organization, we have seen the great difficulties it can pose when people use it for internal communication. The situation regarding external communication is even more problematic. The widespread use of social media pushes companies to engage in constant "conversation" with customers, whether or not they have experience in doing so. This push has completely changed the nature of the relationship between a company and the outside world.

An organization—just like an individual—can have many reasons to communicate. Some of this communication is intended for a specific audience. A yearly report for shareholders, for instance, has a specific purpose and is generally produced according to a certain pattern. But other types of communication are not specifically directed toward any one audience. They might be shared for anyone who may be interested in what the company is doing.

In the pre-Internet, pre–social media era, companies primarily used one-directional communication channels to send their messages to the world at large. They issued written statements and reports, advertised via mass media channels, published informational materials, prepared press releases, or organized press conferences when they had something to say. The one-directional nature of these channels, of course, meant that if the public wanted to contact the organization or get further information about what the company was doing, they had to contact the company via traditional communication means. They could write a letter, phone, or meet the relevant people face-to-face.

Now, however, digital and social media have changed almost all aspects of traditional corporate communication. Most significantly, communication is far less likely to be one directional. Organizations now find themselves interacting with a wide range of audiences, particularly through online channels. These audiences might be customers or people with other interests in the organization, but they might also be people who do not have a particular interest. These people might have "overheard" the conversation or were drawn into it.

Changing Conventions in Communication: Language

Failing to appreciate this directional change described earlier can lead to catastrophic consequences. The case of lululemon athletica, for instance, is a prime example. In early 2013, the sportswear company published a letter on its blog, addressed to "our guests." The letter stated that a fault had been found in a shipment of yoga pants that made them more sheer than customers might have expected. The yoga pants did not meet the company's usual standards, and customers who had bought them were offered a refund. The message went on to say:

> We keenly listen to your feedback and it is paramount to us that you know we're listening. We are 100% committed to doing the right thing for our guests and living our standards. It is with these intentions in mind that we've pulled the affected product from our floors and website.

However, as Creelman found, instead of restoring confidence in the brand, the letter ignited a firestorm.[6] Customers began posting comments on the blog to voice their dissatisfaction with the company's products, services, and efforts to appease them. The company tried again to calm the backlash by issuing a video message from its founder, Chip Wilson, but this failed just as dismally. It seemed that customers were largely angry about what they saw as lululemon's dismissive attitude. This attitude was sensed from the language used in the blog and the video.

In their comments, as Creelman found, customers strategically imported the language from the original message and accented to give support for their arguments. Customer, for instance, said that "*It has been long before 'the beginning of March' that the quality has gone downhill or I write this out of love for lulu ...*" or "*But people have been writing about* *this for a while now and it's disappointing to read that they 'recently' learned about it."*

The vague language used by Wilson in his "apology" video[7] was also heavily scrutinized and criticized. The chief executive officer (CEO)'s apology included *I'm sad. I'm really sad. I'm sad for the repercussions for my actions*, and was picked up in the national media:

> It's a strange apologette of a statement. Is he sad for his actions or merely for the repercussions of them? Does he want to address his buffoonery in the interview, or does he merely want to talk about what a bummer it was that the media called him on it? Perhaps he's most distressed about the financial impact of the recall and continued complaints about product quality.[8]

The letter and the video were generally dismissed as nonapologies and left a bad taste in many mouths. Customer feedback as well as media reports ultimately indicated that lululemon's inappropriate and ineffective communication efforts took their toll on the company's reputation equally—if not more—than the actual product flaws. In the end, the founding CEO (the company's biggest shareholder) sold off half of his holdings.

The lululemon example serves as a warning to companies that it is essential to understand the changing nature of their audience, especially the fact that people are not only able but even keen to engage in a discussion with and about an organization. That means that organizations need to work out how to address and interact with audiences in the most effective and appropriate way. As we saw, the repercussions of getting it wrong are often immediate and can be disastrous.

Changing Conventions in Communication: Immediacy

The expectation of being engaged in continuous conversation with customers, potential customers, and other unknown audiences puts strain on organizations at various levels. At an operational level, they now need to make use of various media listening and monitoring technologies to keep abreast of what is being said about them. But, of course, knowing what the public thinks is not enough. The expectation is real interactivity; so, the organization needs to appoint a person or a team to respond to queries and get involved in conversations. That person or team needs to be able to communicate in a timely manner, use the right tone of voice, and communicate in a way that does not damage the reputation or the image of the brand.

Time is particularly pressing when customers are complaining in public. Customer complaints published on the Internet pose a great risk to the company's reputation and need to be addressed immediately. Failing to respond promptly may further escalate the problem at hand.[9] The social media team at British supermarket Waitrose encountered an angry customer who had posted a complaint about the service received. Unfortunately, it took two days for Waitrose to acknowledge the customer's complaint, and the customer was not shy about letting everyone know he was being ignored:

> @waitrose thanks for ruining our day. Wife stuck @ westbury store 4got payment card and u can't take a card over the phone #customerfirst
>
> Sat, 11 Aug 2012 11:34
>
> ---
>
> @waitrose No reply? #customerlast
>
> Sun, 12 Aug 2012 17:33

The need to engage in digital conversations via a wide range of communicative channels, as Hulme points out, "is both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity from this 'hyper-connectivity' is clear: a company that can communicate with the largest number of potential customers or suppliers, using the medium they prefer, is clearly more likely to succeed."[10] The challenge, however, is that revising and editing posts are not always possible when interacting instantaneously. The need to get a message right the first time puts a lot of pressure on people. The smallest slip—be it the inadvertent use of ALL CAPS, the inability to convey a sincere apology in writing, or a delayed reaction to a complaint—affects the organization's reputation and can undermine customer loyalty. Serious financial consequences could also occur.

To make matters even worse, mistakes leave a digital trace and can become viral. They then reach audiences who might not have been originally involved in the interaction and can make the incident last a lot longer than it might have in earlier years. Chapter 7 discusses in more depth the ins and outs of corporate communication in the digital age.

Implications for the Professional Communicator

In this chapter, we have considered the interaction of internal and external arenas of digital writing, with the aim of understanding how the previously discussed theories of communication work for professionals. We have seen that digital communication channels and new ways of working have brought about changes that have fundamentally altered communication in professional contexts. The biggest change came as the result of social media and user-generated content, which foster interactive, instantaneous conversations, both between members of an organization, and the organization and external stakeholders.

Included case studies and examples illustrated that digital channels change how dialogues occur, how relationships are forged, how new conventions are negotiated and enforced, and how stakeholder perceptions are shaped.[11] Professional communicators need to remain observant and aware of the ongoing challenges and opportunities arising from the new media landscape. Managers leading virtual teams need to be aware that communication in the virtual work environment can be seriously hindered by the lack of common ground.

Understanding the opportunities and challenges is also vital for external interactions. Organizations must change their old command-and-control communication model to embrace real engagement with their external stakeholders. The example from lululemon illustrates that the unfortunate formulation of messages and inappropriate responses can actually damage a company's reputation more than a product flaw. We have also seen the crucial role played by immediacy. The advent of Twitter and other social networking sites has elevated the importance of having a proactive, instantaneous engagement with various audiences, which requires organizations to break clear from the traditional communication models and message flows.

The main lesson from this chapter is that in order to keep up with changes in the communication environment, companies must actively forge their own paths and cultivate a new range of abilities focused on exceptional linguistic skills in digital contexts. The label *Linguarati* is a good way to capture the complexity of the skills necessary for effective digital writing. It combines theoretical knowledge, an understanding of how language and communication work in the workplace (as discussed in Chapter 2) and in digitally mediated communication channels (as discussed in Chapter 3). It also encompasses reflective skills and flexibility to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, all combined with a strong understanding of how businesses work in the 21st century. This skill set will become a very powerful asset for any organization. To achieve this knowledge, in the following chapters, we will go on to examine in greater detail two of the most often used digital channels in the workplace: e-mail and instant messenger, as well as the language of corporate communication in the digital realm.

CHAPTER 5

Writing E-mail Messages

Dating back to the early 1970s, e-mail has become one of the most fundamental communication devices of the modern era. The birth of e-mail, however, was a lucky accident. As Hafner and Lyon discuss, the predecessor of the Internet (the ARPANET) was not designed as a message system, but rather as a tool for resource sharing:

> The ARPANET's creators didn't have a grand vision for the invention of an earth circling message-handling system. But once the first couple of nodes were installed, early users turned the system of linked computers into personal as well as professional communications tool[1]

Since its inception, the spread of e-mail communication has been unstoppable. As some researchers claim, it is "the only technology with which the average Internet user is familiar."[2] E-mail has truly become an integral part of our lives. It is vital for both our personal and professional interactions, as statistics on sites such as www.internetlivestats.com indicate. As we can see on the screenshot from the live stats website in Figure 5.1, close to 2.5 million e-mails are sent every second across the globe. Quite a large proportion is spam, but even if only a third of the total number of e-mails sent in a second are genuine messages, that are still nearly 800,000 messages per second.

Tallies of the number of e-mails sent each day are truly staggering. Reports in 2013 estimated that between 2013 and 2017, the number of business e-mail accounts will grow from 929 million to 1.1 billion. By the end of 2017, it is predicted that 132 billion business e-mail messages will be sent and received every day.[3]

Despite its prevalence though, we still have not actually established the norms and conventions of how to use e-mail. While there has long been

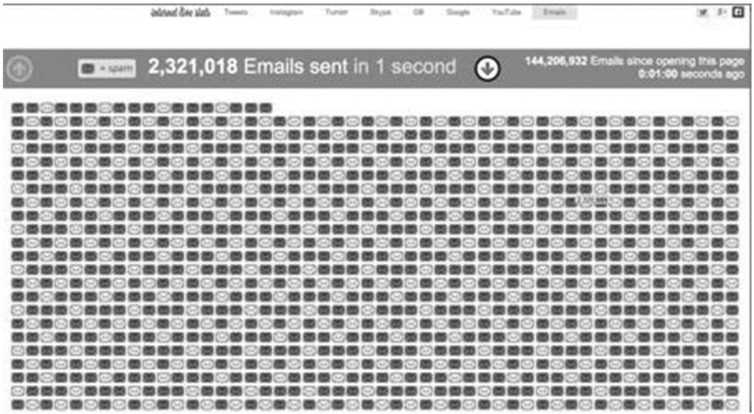

Figure 5.1 A visualization of Internet traffic

an accepted form and style for letters, we are making up e-mail as we go along. We can all probably relate to this confusion just by thinking of the sheer variety of sign -offs we see from the different people we correspond with regularly. While a traditional letter might end with sincerely or cordially, e-mails end in any number of ways, from best wishes, kind regards, or thanks, to no closing line at all. People all over the world inadvertently add to the confusion and possibly offend because of the lack of shared rules. While e-mail is no longer a cutting-edge tool, some people still struggle to come to grips with local conventions or emerging norms.

E-mail is difficult to get right precisely because of the duality it creates. On the surface, it looks like a familiar genre because it is written and resembles traditionally written letters. But on a deeper level, e-mail is a different and complex communicative context. The new context not only affects how we use language when writing an e-mail but also changes the rules and conventions people follow when they interact with others. People often go wrong by not taking this double-sidedness into consideration. They assume they know how e-mail works because they know how to write a letter, or they attempt to create or follow general rules about what is acceptable and what is not when communicating via e-mail, such as online e-mail etiquette or style guides.

But as we saw in the previous chapters, generalizations and prescriptivism (do and don't lists) don't seem to work when people want to improve their digital communication skills. Style guides can help, but the focus should really be on context. Who is the message addressed to? What is the obvious and overt purpose of the e-mail? Where and when was it written? These factors have an inevitable effect on what works and what does not work in e-mail communication. All sorts of variations could be right, depending on the circumstances and context, as we saw in the example of Jim's e-mail in Chapter 1. It is important to acknowledge a range of contextual cues as we saw in the number of different ways in which Jim could have styled his e-mail to his team. But it is also necessary to understand the technological affordances of the e-mail medium and the new communicative situations that came into existence as a result of these affordances. These new situations relate to three key areas in e-mail communication: timing, style, and e-mail-specific actions.

Timing

Timing is one of the most fascinating aspects of e-mails. The immediacy of the medium and the fact that it enables you to develop a dialogue distinguish e-mail from traditional letter-writing, as was pointed out by Carl and Lenny when they explained what e-mail was to Homer Simpson:[4]

HOMER: What's an email?
LENNY: It's a computer thing, like, er, an electric letter.
CARL: Or a quiet phone call.

During the course of e-mail history, both the popular press[5] and academic research[6] have made repeated attempts to decide whether e-mail is, in fact, closer to speech or closer to writing. The distinction is important because the way we use language differs considerably between the two.

Speech versus Writing

Speech is spontaneous and, partly because of this, people frequently do not speak in sentences but in short fragments linked by conjunctions (such as 'and') or divided by pauses. They often use a great deal of repetition and a wider variety of nonverbal cues that assist with the "on-the-go" planning needed when we talk. In writing, however, people have time to plan. We tend to write in well-formed, often more complex ways. Written language is structured, and often more formal than speech. And because writing is traditionally a "monologue" rather than an interpersonal interaction, texts do not have to be contextualized—there is little or no need for nonverbal cues.

The relationship between digital communication and writing and speech was traditionally thought to depend on the synchronicity or asynchronicity of the interaction. Synchronous communication channels occur when conversational partners are logged on simultaneously, and the interaction takes place in real or almost-real time (for instance chatting). For asynchronous modes, such as bulletin boards, forums, and e-mails, partners do not need to be logged on at the same time, and considerable time gaps can occur between the messages.

Traditionally, synchronous communication modes were thought to be closer to speech and asynchronous modes were thought to contain the structural features of writing. Following this line of thought then, e-mails should resemble writing in most cases. This is indeed an idea repeatedly reinforced by popular media and in a large number of e-mail etiquette guides. But this is not actually the case. We often write electronic missives that seem much closer to spoken language. They can be unedited and informal, and may include nonverbal cues scattered throughout the text.

In the past, the decision to use a written or spoken style was related to your relationship with your recipient. Your language was a measure of familiarity as well as personal preferences. As e-mail has become a common, everyday tool in our personal and professional lives, its novelty value as a device that allows people to "chat" across geographically distant places has worn off. Nowadays, the language used in e-mails reflects the level of formality or informality the writer wants to convey. Synchronicity, however, remains an important factor. The following e-mail exchange illustrates a situation in which I was contacted by our online course developer, who enquired about my availability for training. I know Joe, so the e-mail is quite informal, but his message still contains the formalities typical of traditional letters. There is a greeting, a reason for him contacting me, a farewell, and a signature, including his name and title.

>>>On 23 Feb 2012, at 09:44, Joe wrote:>>>
Hi Erika
Just emailing to arrange a date for Moodle training, when are you free?

Thanks.
Best wishes,
Joe
Online Course Developer

My reply came within five minutes, so although it wasn't synchronous, there was no great time lag.

>>> Erika Darics <Erika.Darics@ac.uk> 23/02/2012 09:49 >>>
Hi
is next wednesday afternoon ok?
from 1.30?
Erika

Some of the formalities of letter writing are still present in my message (the greeting and signature), but the sentences have become fragments and I didn't use capital letters at the beginning of sentences. Finally, here's Joe's response, which came one minute later.

>>>On 23 Feb 2012, at 09:50, Joe wrote:>>>
Yes that should be fine, could we say 2pm?

This exchange shows that the more synchronous, or dialogue-like the exchange became, the more it lost the features representative of writing: both in terms of language use (fragmentation, grammatical inaccuracy) and social convention (a lack of formal start and ending). As a general rule of thumb, then, we might conclude that the more quickly the messages are exchanged, the more e-mail exchanges resemble a real dialogue and the more the message can adapt to the features of spoken interaction. This observation then leads us to the question of speed: What is a normal or expected response time, and how can timing be meaningful during interactions?

Timing, and specifically when and how quickly a message is sent, can be meaningful. It can have an effect on both ends of the communication process. At one end, it could affect how the writer formulates the message, and at the other it could color the way the recipient makes sense of what he read.

In the first instance, we have discussed in detail how timing can have an impact on the way messages are formulated. We saw that the quicker the exchange, the more synchronous the interaction, and the more speech-like the language becomes as a result.

The second instance refers to how time affects meaning making. The time stamp on an e-mail often functions as a cue that affects both how we interpret the message and what we think about the sender. Senders, especially if they are aware of this, might willingly influence the process of impression formation by, for example, holding back messages. This is because an immediate response might signify that the recipient is always available, even for low-priority requests.

The fact that readers assign meaning to subtle cues such as the timing of the messages is further proof that in digital communication, anything and everything can become meaningful. As we have discussed, this is due to the fact that people have no access to other social, audio, and visual cues, and therefore they rely on contextual information embedded in the messages—even if the cues are "invisible." Ledbetter's research found that addressees generally perceive fast replies more positively than slow replies.[7] Of course, meaning making and the interpretation of content and relational intent is highly context dependent and is influenced by how quickly the sender actually expects a response: "One may come to expect that a particular relational partner always uses a slow reply rate and, thus, may not interpret a slow reply rate from that person as negatively as from a person who typically replies quickly."

Nonetheless, it is worth bearing in mind that time-related cues—when and how quickly e-mail senders receive a response—might have a considerable effect on compliance, work efficiency, or the outcome of the interaction. Delaying a response could cause considerable problems in the workplace, but interestingly these problems have less to do with the actual disruption of the work and much more with the problem of interpreting online silence and the frustration that arises when there is no quick explanation for it. Long, unexplained silences can cause online relationships to deteriorate.[8]

Style

Naomi Baron, one of the most prominent researchers of digital communication, observes that "Attitudes toward linguistic style—and resulting usage patterns—matter not because one style is 'right' and another 'wrong' but because heightened attention to stylistic concerns generally signals that significant social and/or linguistic change is afoot."[9]

The level of formality is a critical aspect of style, and, as we have seen, might be linked to the prevalence of spoken or written features in e-mail messages. But there is much more to it than that. The level of formality itself can serve as a contextualization cue that helps the reader to interpret how exactly the message was intended. The choice of a particular writing style can be greatly influenced by the intended purpose of the message. A university staff member, for example, explains:

> I would be much more formal in requesting a student to come to a meeting about something that could have disciplinary consequences, and much less formal in acknowledging a student's email explaining that he won't be in my class today because he is ill.[10]

By choosing different levels of formality, this lecturer signals the importance of the message to her students. In other cases, managers switch to a more formal style, or "depersonalize" the correspondence if they want to signal greater authority.[11] Similarly, modifying the level of formality can contextualize the tone of voice, as a city attorney found out in the following case study reported in the *London Evening Standard*.[12]

Case Study 5.1: Why Tone of Voice Is Important in E-mails

Mr Phillips, a lawyer at a London firm, sent a secretary this e-mail after she spilt ketchup on his trousers during lunch at the firm's canteen:

Hi Jenny, I went to a dry cleaners at lunch and they said it would cost £4 to remove ketchup stains. If you cd let me have the cash today, that wd be much appreciated. Thanks Richard.

Ms Amner's response:

I must apologize for not getting back to you straight away but due to my mother's sudden illness, death, and funeral I have had more pressing issues than your £4.

I apologize again for accidentally getting a few splashes of ketchup on your trousers. Obviously your financial need as a senior associate is greater than mine as a mere secretary.

Having already spoken to and shown your e-mail and Anne-Marie's note to various partners, 7lawyers, and trainees in ECC&T and IP/IT, they kindly offered to do a collection to raise the £4. I however declined their kind offer but should you feel the urgent need for the £4 it will be on my desk this afternoon. Jenny.

1. What is the effect of Jenny's choice of style?
2. Which grammatical and vocabulary choices set the level of formality?

The level of formality, of course, is not merely influenced by the purpose of the communication. It also depends on who the recipient might be. Finding the right level of formality for specific addressees can be a demanding task. This is especially true for people with a lack of experience and insider knowledge of the norms and rules of a specific community.[13] In such cases, they might incorrectly draw on their previous e-mail experiences in other social or professional situations. Getting it wrong, however, might have a serious impact on how likely people are to comply with the message content. If the level of formality differs from what is expected, especially if it is lower than the expectation, the willingness to act on message content decreases significantly.

So how can people get the level of formality right? First, we need to be aware of the various contextual factors affecting what is acceptable and expected. Writing to authority figures or addressing someone for the first time usually requires greater attention to formality than you might use when addressing someone familiar to you or lower in status. Second, we need to be aware that several levels of linguistic production contribute to the perceived formality of e-mail messages. For instance, we perceive messages as formal if they contain:

- Complex, edited, and grammatically correct sentences
- Formulaic features of letters: forms of address, sign -offs, and signature
- Vocabulary choices typical of written correspondence
- Attention to politeness, for example, the use of indirect requests
- Lack of nonverbal features: abbreviations, smileys, and similar cues

Finally, we need to understand that every workplace, team, or group has its own norms and rules about what is appropriate and what is expected. Observing the conventions used by others in our workplace and then applying those rules to our own style enable us to maximize our effectiveness as e-mail users.

Technical Affordances

In the previous two sections we have seen that e-mails have brought about significant changes in the way we communicate compared to previously existing modes, speech, and writing. Perhaps, the most obvious and prominent difference, however, is related to the affordances enabled by e-mail technology, such as quoting, embedding, and copying.

Quoting and Embedding

One of the unique features of e-mails is that respondents can embed their response within the body of the message they received or quote considerable chunks of the original message in their reply. This technique is particularly beneficial when several points in the original message need responses. By adding comments directly under, above, or within the text, people do not have to include lengthy cross-references and do not need to paraphrase the original message. This tactic is often used in professional contexts, which is hardly surprising given its many benefits. These include:

- Creating a context for understanding the reply
- Serving to remind the reader about the ongoing discussion
- Improving clarity and reducing ambiguity
- Enabling reactions to be structured and topic oriented
- Removing the need to paraphrase
- Providing a copy of the interaction for other stakeholders

E-mail threads produced during this type of exchange are complex intermingled texts and can eventually include several rounds of interaction in forwarded, edited, quoted, and embedded format.

Research shows that people have generally developed the competence to produce and decipher such complex texts, but a word of warning is due. As David Crystal points out:

> Although a single piece of text may be preserved throughout a thread of messages (…) each screen incarnation gives it a different status and may present it in a different form—either through electronic interference from the software or editorial interference from the new user.[14]

This means that the meaning and function of original messages may change if they are modified, shortened, or taken out of their initial context. Therefore, quoting and embedding should be used with a level of caution, especially when responses include only fragments or chunks of the original message.

Copying (One Sender to Many Recipients)

Arguably the most controversial technical affordance of e-mail communication is the ability to copy (CC) and blind copy (BCC) several recipients into a message. The CC and BCC function can contribute to a wide range of communication and work processes. For example, they:

- Enable senders to distribute information quickly
- Facilitate participation in the discussion by making it accessible
- Function as a managerial tool that enables the monitoring of work processes
- Provide accountability for witness support or backup

The last two functions have attracted media attention, as this article excerpt attests:

> The passive aggressive CC is the ultimate power-play. It's a reminder that email is neither a private conversation nor a safe space: at any moment, an interloper can be invited without warning, and bear witness to a transcript of the whole conversation, the electronic trail that testifies to your inadequacy. The masterstroke is the specific point at which the CC is enacted—usually after you've sent something unintentionally aggressive or useless—and the refusal by the sender to reference what they've done. But make no mistake—they've gamed you.[15]

To understand why seeing an outsider's name suddenly pop up in the address bar of an ongoing interaction may lead to serious interpersonal conflict, we should recall the three basic aspects of digital communication discussed in Chapter 3: intentionality, negativity, and power.

As we have repeatedly seen, people may assign meaning to everything and anything in digital communication. If the suddenly appearing CC is not explicitly explained in the body of the message, the direct and indirect recipients make assumptions about the possible intention of the sender and the communicative function of the act. And as we know, such assumptions are likely to be negative. Finally, as highlighted in the aforementioned quote, copying often includes an element of power play: "Copying in colleagues, and especially a superordinate, from one's own department is a practice for giving a message a stronger institutional anchoring and thus for strengthening one's authority as a speaker."[16]

Case Study 5.2: CC Power Play

Joe is a junior course administrator and Katherine is a university lecturer. In the following exchange, Joe sends an e-mail on November 1 reminding Katherine to collect assessment work as marks are due to be reported to Margaret, their superior, on the following day. Joe also copies his e-mail to Margaret. On November 2, Katherine replies to Joe objecting to the fact that Margaret has been sent a copy.

FROM: Joe XX <Joe.XX@firm.com>
SENT: 01/11/2012
CC: Katherine, Margaret
SUBJECT: Submission deadline
Dear Katherine,
You have yet to collect your Dissertation Formative Assessment work from Room 301; please do this as soon as possible as I believe the marks are due to Margaret by tomorrow.
Regards,
Joe
Course Administrator

FROM: Katherine@firm.com
SENT: 02/11/2012
CC: Joe
SUBJECT: Re: Submission deadline
Dear Joe
I really appreciate your concern, but I find your method of copying Margaret in the email a rather childish and intimidating procedure.
Your effort to remind me is greatly appreciated, but can I please ask you to leave it up to me when and how I do my job.
As far as I am concerned you are neither my line manager nor some sort of task-master to keep an eye on my deadlines.
Best wishes,
Katherine

1. What caused Katherine's anger? Was it justified? Did she handle the situation well?
2. How could this conflict have been avoided?
3. Have you ever come across a similar situation at your workplace? If so, how was it handled?

Lessons Learned

E-mail constitutes a complex communicative form. On the surface it is familiar as it resembles traditional letters. In terms of language use and interaction rituals, however, it differs from letters considerably. We examined in detail three specific aspects of e-mail communication that might cause uncertainty about what is effective, what is acceptable, or what might be expected: namely, the timing, style, and the affordances of the communication technology.

The concepts presented in this chapter can be viewed as positioned on a continuum: spoken-like versus written-like, monologue versus dialogue, synchronous versus asynchronous, formal versus informal, conventional versus unconventional, and one-to-one versus one-to-many. Striking the right balance between these polarities is far from easy. It is no wonder e-mail communication causes a great deal of irritation and conflict for many on a daily basis.

We can get closer to understanding how to write an effective e-mail, however, by being aware of how people make sense of the messages they receive. Understanding how this sense making can be influenced is the next step. Through various examples, we have seen that there is no one-size-fits-all guide for writing "appropriate" e-mails: Our messages are created for a purpose, for a specific audience, within a particular organizational culture, and according to team or workplace norms. What might be condemned in one office—the use of emoticons, for example—could well be a regular occurrence in another.

We also need to remember that all (professional) interactions are multilayered. People interpret both content and relational messages—whether or not these submessages are intentionally encoded by the writer.

So when writing an e-mail, consider how both layers might be interpreted by your addressee. Make sure that your friendly–supportive–collegial interpersonal intentions come across. Be social, too. Research has shown that messages with social content were significantly more likely to receive an immediate response.[17]

Finally, perhaps the most important lesson of this chapter is that anything can become meaningful in an e-mail. Recall the concept of intentionality and the negativity effect. Readers might assign meaning to things that were not intended to be meaningful. Even the style, the extent of emoticon use, or the timing of the message can influence the reader. And this influence is multifaceted: It refers not only to how the content of the message is interpreted, but also the impression readers form about the sender. That, in turn, might affect how willing they will be to act on your e-mail.

CHAPTER 6

Chat and Instant Messaging

In the previous chapter, we saw that e-mail has already become a ubiquitous mode of communication in the workplace. In this chapter, we explore another mode that is on its way to becoming similarly prevalent: instant messaging (IM), also referred to as chat.

Nowadays people in professional environments can choose from a wide array of communication media, several of which include voice or video streaming. Interestingly, though, despite the availability of these richer channels, the use of text-based IM is on the rise. In a recent survey, the Radicati group found that the popularity of IM is growing significantly. In 2015, the number of worldwide IM accounts stood at around 3.2 billion, but that figure is expected to grow to over 3.8 billion by 2019. In business contexts, 84 percent of respondents said that their organization mandated the use of a corporate-sanctioned IM, which suggests that the technology has been widely embraced in the corporate world.[1] IM is also increasingly used for external communication and customer services.

The IM growth trend seems to contradict the dismissive view of IM as nothing more than a turbocharged e-mail that contributes to digital addiction and diminishes productivity.[2] In fact, my own research has shown that IM has many documented benefits, the most important being that it acts as an almost synchronous channel for interaction when both conversational partners are online.[3] IM allows colleagues to contact each other for quick questions and clarifications without significant disruption to the workflow. In virtual work environments, its use helps create the notion of a shared space. The "line" is left open indefinitely, allowing participants to communicate with each other sporadically on an as-needed basis. For external communication, "live chats" are appealing for businesses because of their low running cost and the opportunities they present for synchronized interactions. From the customer's perspective, communicating in this way offers anonymity.

Along with the growing popularity of IM, however, comes the pressure to use it efficiently and effectively. IM is a deceptively complex communication channel—perhaps even more complex than e-mail. While e-mail at least resembles traditional written genres, like letters or memos, IM is not really comparable to any other previously existing communication channel. It is a communication mode in its own right—a hybrid between speech and writing. This hybrid quality means that the way people use language in IM combines the elements of both types of communication. It is spontaneous, often unedited, responsive and informal, like speech, but it is also like writing because the transcript is permanent and searchable. And since there is no physical contact between the people communicating, those all-important audiovisual cues (discussed in Chapter 2) are missing.

Of course, it is not just the language of IM that is different. The social practice of how communication happens—the norms and conventions—also differ from any other communication mode that has existed before. Consider something as simple as starting a conversation. In face-to-face communication, this process has its own structure, of which we are subconsciously aware. We greet someone, engage in small talk, and then move on to the substance of the conversation. The same could work in IM, of course, but the timing of the stages can become problematic, as in the following IM conversation collected from a real interaction.

TASK 6.1

(1) [09:39] Sam: Hey Danielle
(2) [09:39] Sam: how r u doing
(3) [09:39] Danielle: Good morning Sam
(4) [09:39] Danielle: I am doing well, thanks
(5) [09:39] Danielle: how was your weekend?
(6) [09:40] Sam: r u aware of any failures from last week - sessions not delivered on time, material not delivered on time etc
(7) [09:40] Sam: it was good thanks and how was yours
(8) [09:41] Danielle: unfortunately I am not, can you possibly check with Larry?

1. Can you make sense of the succession of the messages?
2. What is your strategy if your IM conversations seems to be similarly disrupted?

Reading the preceding script requires some skill, as the lines seem to be jumbled up. This is because, in one-way IM systems, conversational partners construct their messages separated from each other, without awareness of whether the other person is still writing or not. Since the system transmits and displays messages linearly (i.e., in order of receipt) responses often end up being separated from the original message with which they were associated.

As we can see from the earlier discussion, the messages end up being in the wrong order due to a lack of coordination. In the example, while Danielle is still talking about the weekend in line 5, Sam has already moved on to talk about a task-specific topic. Possibly, concurrently or right after sending the message in line 6, Sam notices Danielle's question in line 5, and provides an answer in line 7, extending the small talk by asking further questions about Danielle's weekend. By this time, however, Danielle has already moved on to address the work-related issue at hand.

Based on the previous example it is clear that although the team members of this particular virtual team have adopted the practices of spoken workplace interactions, in that a certain amount of small talk precedes the introduction of the main topic, the translation of these practices into IM are far from straightforward: How long should people greet each other? And what is the acceptable length of small talk? Are there any rules for putting right a disrupted conversation and, if so, what are they?

Although there are no definite answers to these questions, the key is perhaps to view IM as what Susan Herring calls an "adaptive medium."[4] On the one hand, people who use IM have devised a range of innovative methods to replace the all-important nonverbal cues. On the other hand, the fact that the conversation leaves a persistent record behind like writing helps people to make sense of the ongoing interaction. As Herring attests, IM technology helps people to become more aware of how they use their language because the conversation remains on the screen longer and allows people to revisit it and reflect on it in a way spoken language does not.

It is better to focus on how things are actually done in IM (not how they *should* be done) to raise our linguistic and communication awareness. We can then be better prepared to adapt to a range of communicative situations at hand. We will explore various techniques and strategies used in documented cases in research, and in datasets collected from real interactions. The main aim of this activity is to arrive at an understanding of how these strategies function and what they mean. This is not to say that all the strategies explored are consciously used by all participants. They might equally be unconscious behaviors that IM users adopt to ensure that their communication is effective.

Is It Really "Instant"?

The fact that IM conversations are persistent, scrollable, and searchable, has led to the development of new uses that compromise the notion of *instant* or synchronous. We have already discussed how synchronicity and asynchronicity have a profound effect on how people use language. IM was, for some time, considered a prime example of a synchronous communication tool, because in order to chat, both participants had to be logged on simultaneously. However, recently, people have begun to utilize the persistent nature of the communication technology, using it for "quasi"- or "asynchronous" interactions. One such use is the "sticky note" technique, predominantly used in internal interactions. It refers to cases in which the sender types a message without expecting or requiring an immediate response.

"Sticky Notes"

Study the following conversational extract from a real workplace interaction. How does Asid react when Jodie tells him she is not available to talk?

(1) [12:48 p.m.] Asid: Hi . . . a couple of quick points:
(2) [12:48 p.m.] Jodie: ok . . . on call now with Larry . . . but will respond as I can

(3) [12:49 p.m.] Asid: (cool, no immediate response needed, and that's why I'm pinging you)
(4) [12:49 p.m.] Asid: I would like to take leave on Jan-19, due to my sister's wedding

This extract of a real-life workplace conversation gives a good example of the sticky-note technique. In line 2, Jodie clearly indicates her unavailability for interaction by letting Asid know that she is busy on a phone call. Asid's response in line 3 acknowledges this information. He even uses parentheses as a nonverbal sign that his message in line 3 has secondary status. Furthermore, he acknowledges that he is using IM to make his leave request because that gives Jodie the opportunity to pick up his messages at a more convenient time.

In a study on the uses and functions of IM in the workplace, Isaacs and his colleagues found that a high proportion of people who use IM in their everyday workplace interactions employed this "sticky note" technique. The research found that the technique broadened IM's usefulness, in that people knew their message "would be visible as soon as the person returned to their computer, and it would be easier to retrieve and respond to than voice-mail."[5]

Multitasking and Multicommunication

Digital communication technologies have enhanced the ability to multitask or "multi-communicate" (i.e., to participate in several conversations concurrently). Multitasking in the virtual environment is a prevalent working method, and, in some cases, it is even the expectation, rather than a possibility. Isaacs et al. for instance found that at least one person multitasked in 85.7 percent of the virtual conversations they observed.[6] Multiple conversations—either within the medium or outside it—have also been found to be a common practice. Team members might engage in several concurrent conversations. They might be unrelated or closely linked to each other. A typical scenario of this type is when team members use IM during tele- or videoconferencing to pose talk to colleagues who are not involved in the meeting about the ongoing discussion.

Our ability to talk to several people at the same time does not necessarily mean that we can engage in all of these conversations at the same level and sustain the same level of attention. Although some researchers say that the "juggling" of multiple tasks or conversations can go undetected,[7] much more research suggests that you can often tell when someone is doing it. Specific language use and the timing of interactions can reveal a lot, for example. Gaps or silences can occur when our attention is divided. An increased number of spelling mistakes can also be tell-tale signs of multitasking or multicommunication.

These issues lead us back to the question of norms and conventions—both in terms of how people communicate in the digital realm and how they complete their work tasks. Leaving a "sticky note" message on someone's IM screen or engaging in concurrent conversations or multitasking during a conversation contributes to a change in perception and expectation about how people manage and coordinate their work tasks. Both these strategies seem to violate simple politeness principles, as does talking to someone when he or she has made it clear that he or she is unavailable. Talking to several people at once could also be seen as very rude and can seriously affect both how we understand what the conversation is about, how we perceive our partners, and how much we prioritize the tasks in hand. From the point of view of communicating in a polite manner, therefore, the changing conventions raise several questions. For example, what strategies do people use to avoid miscommunication—both on the level of content and interpersonal intentions? What is an accepted response time? What meaning, if any, do people assign to grammar and spelling mistakes?

In the remainder of the chapter, we will respond to these questions by looking at the strategies people employ to manage online conversations and avoid miscommunication.

Managing IM Conversations

In the previous section, we saw that IM users, like users of other text-based communication genres, are at disadvantage due to the lack of audiovisual information available to them and the lack of a shared physical environment. This shortcoming is particularly relevant when the interactional partners want to ensure that the conversation goes smoothly, without disturbing overlaps and annoying gaps. It might become a critical issue in customer service chats, where miscommunication and delays can have a serious effect on how the quality of the exchange is perceived. Chris Williams, whose customer service chat log went viral in 2013, had just such an infuriating experience.[8]

> farah: one moment please let me check it further for you..
> Me: ONE MOMENT? NOT SURE WHAT YOUR DEFINITION OF A MOMENT IS BUT THIS HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR A LONG TIME AND YOU OBVIOUSLY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU ARE DOING.

The aforementioned chat is an extreme example in which the time lapse between Farah asking Williams to wait a "moment" and his response was more than 10 minutes long. In this case, it is little wonder the delay caused so much frustration. However, even when gaps are shorter, frustration can still occur. This is particularly true if an upcoming delay is not signaled in an appropriate way or if it is not clear that the person with whom you are communicating is still composing his or her next message.

More recent messaging systems have already started to remedy this lack of information by signaling that the message is being written—often by displaying a moving pencil or dancing dot icon. But language use, and nonverbal signals in particular, can also help improve interaction management. This is particularly important because, as we have seen in the disjointed conversation between Danielle and Sam, IM messages do not necessarily follow each other in logical order; they are displayed by the messaging system in the order in which they were received, which can make the conversation feel disjointed.

"Chunking" and Nonverbal Signals

IM users have devised a range of strategies to help avoid incoherent conversation. Chunking, for example, is the process of breaking longer messages into short, rapid transmissions. The break usually comes at a place where we would normally pause or change intonation if we were speaking. In a case study of manager–employee conversations conducted by Mackiewicz and Lam, almost half the messages written between the two participants were broken up parts of a longer message, that is, chunks, as in the following extract:[9]

1 10:25:52 Director: Tim
2 10:25:58 Director: the furniture has arrived
3 10:26:04 Director: at the school
4 10:26:22 Director: how do u want to get the computers over there?

The researchers pointed out that the chunking strategy has a very important function in the communication process: by making her transmissions short and sending them in rapid sequence, the Director "increased the chance that all of the acts she was doing with words—getting attention, informing, and questioning—would appear with no intervening and disrupting transmissions." In effect, she was making sure that her message, as well as its urgency, came across and the work would get done. In another study, Markman showed that apart from the "rhetorical force" of holding the floor, chunking can also add to the visual force of a communication. That makes it particularly useful, for instance, in digital negotiations where the participants need to be able to persuade their conversational partners.[10]

Another cue people use to signal that more is to follow is the ellipsis (…). People use this technique to mark unfinished sentences and to avoid interrupting. Simpson, for example, shows in an example that a chat user, Maggi, adds the three dots at the end of her sequence in a failed attempt to "hold the floor."[11] She uses it again at the start of the next message to link it to her previous message:

1 Maggi: there is still so much to do ....
2 Michael C: I wasn't invited anywhere by anyone!
3 Ying-Lan: That's wonderful to have a special Christmas in Norway.
4 Maggi: .... but i AM NOT MAKING MYSELF CRAZY

It is important to remember, however, that ellipsis dots can mean a whole range of other things. These will be discussed a bit later.

TASK 6.2

In the following exchange, two colleagues are discussing an issue they have spotted in their computer database. (Names of the programs they talk about have been changed for confidentiality reasons.)

1. Jones | 16:32 | there were two Coaching sessions on the X showing as Y and should have been Z
2. Kaithlin | 16:32 | god
3. Jones | 16:33 | but they were reflecting correctly on the system
4. Jones | 16:33 | so no worries there... BUT
5. Jones | 16:33 | we have that extra Z day charge for the Change Management

What is the nonverbal strategy they use to signal that "more is to come" and to ensure that their conversational partner does not interrupt the flow of the messages?

Contextualizing Emotions and Intents

Avoiding gaps and overlaps is of course only one part of ensuring that a conversation is successful. Users also need to include relational or emotional information. This is traditionally achieved through auditory and visual signals in face-to-face conversations. Excitement, friendliness, surprise, anger, sarcasm, irony, and a range of other implicit or emotional messages are easily encoded in conversations with gestures, facial expressions, or tone of our voice, volume, or intonation. In digital communication, users have to make use of the keyboard to be "personal" and convey the desired intent—and they have done so in the most creative ways throughout the development of computer-mediated communication.

The earliest study on the "paralanguage" of teleconferences was published by John Carey as far back as 1980.[12] It lists a number of techniques that enable users to "communicate expressive feelings, modify meanings of the words and help to regulate interaction between speakers." Ever since, the creative use of language to convey nonverbal meaning has been the focus of a huge number of studies. As Figure 6.1 illustrates, acronyms

Figure 6.1 The generation gap reflects our digital cue usage

(e.g., LOL), word reductions (e.g., thnx), letter or number homophones (e.g., u, 4ever), exaggerated spelling (e.g., sooooo), or excessive or unconventional punctuation (e.g., !!!!!!) are a frequent source of confusion and of enormous interest to researchers and the media alike.

Emoticons

No book on digital communication should exist without a section on emoticons. Emoticons, often seen as the symbols of computer-mediated communication, have been around since almost the very beginning of digital communication. It is said that computer scientist Scott Fahlman invented them in 1982 to signify jokes in bulletin board interactions.

Born as a method to signal humorous intent, no wonder the emoticon is still often viewed as a representation of a smiley face. Since emoticons are popular across various channels of digital writing, the observations and points made in this section are also relevant to IM, e-mail, or any other form of social media. However, in order to observe the work these symbols do, it is best to focus on synchronous two-way interactions. That is where we can best observe how an emoticon is understood by conversational partners and how they respond to it.

Emoticons are a highly controversial issue in business communication. Guidelines and communication books often advise against using them at all, taking the view that they are unprofessional and overly familiar. But in professional situations, where a personal approach is essential—such as in customer service chats or online consultancy—embedding emotions in written text has been found to significantly enhance the interactional experience and lead to customer satisfaction.[13] The effective communication of emotions and friendly intent is also essential in internal communication situations, where it can be important for motivating team members,[14] and in business-critical interactions, such as negotiations, it can influence the decisions being made.

Considering the various communication scenarios, it seems hasty to dismiss the emoticon off hand. It is, after all, a potential resource for communicating emotions. Emoticons achieve a wide range of functions during an interaction, though these are often oversimplified. This is especially critical in communication training, where, as Skovholt and her colleagues put it, guidelines "tend to be normative and colored by the author's personal values rather than reflecting the actual use and communicative functions of emoticons."[15]

It is not surprising that people are often unsure about the norms and usages of emoticons. Researchers are still unclear about how emoticons are interpreted in digital writing: whether they should be viewed as unconscious nonverbal facial expressions or, like wording, as deliberately encoded elements of intentional communication.[16] In the following section, we will explore extracts from actual instant message interactions; and by applying the stages of the DEANEX method (Chapter 3), we will learn more about how exactly these signals have been used and what they are supposed to mean.

The comparison example in Table 6.2 shows smiley emoticons (on the left) being used to convey friendly intent. Emoticons of this type are often used as marks to close a conversation, so that the participants do not feel that the end has come too abruptly. To understand the function

Table 6.2 "Playing" with emoticons

1. Andrew | 02:14 pm | Can I call you now? We could then wrap up sooner :-) and you can go home. 2. Fabiana | 02:15 pm | thanks :-) but rushing some stuff 3. Fabiana | 02:15 pm | 5pm, can? 4. Andrew | 02:15 pm | okay :-) 5. Fabiana | 02:16 pm | thanks :-)	1. Andrew | 02:14 pm | Can I call you now? We could then wrap up sooner and you can go home. 2. Fabiana | 02:15 pm | thanks but rushing some stuff 3. Fabiana | 02:15 pm | 5pm, can? 4. Andrew | 02:15 pm | okay 5. Fabiana | 02:16 pm | thanks

and usefulness of the smiley emoticons in this particular exchange, let us compare the original version with the version on the right where we have removed the smiley faces.

By removing emoticons from the text, we can see how they add a layer of emotional information. In line 2, for example, Fabiana's smiley works as an acknowledgment of the friendly intent communicated by Andrew in line 1—particularly if we take into consideration that Andrew is higher in the organizational hierarchy. Then, in lines 4 and 5, we see a mutual exchange of "smiles." This is a reassurance from both sides that Fabiana's rejection of Andrew's request was not taken badly and both colleagues maintained their positive attitude.

In another example, emoticons play an even more complex role. Let us revisit the conversation from TASK 2.1. Here Kristie is Andrew's superior in the organizational hierarchy:

1. Andrew | 03:44 pm | I'm on a semi-leave tomorrow and will be working out of home...call me on my cell if you need anything :)
2. Kristie | 03:47 pm | Thanks. I hope you had caught up with your rest well.
3. Andrew | 03:47 pm | I haven't, but I hope to do so tomorrow.
4. Kristie | 03:50 pm | Must :) OK?
5. Andrew | 03:50 pm | yes ma'am
6. Kristie | 03:50 pm | haha

In the excerpt, Andrew and Kristie are about to finish their conversation, and start to discuss personal issues. Kristie expresses her concern about Andrew in line 2. We can infer from the conversation that Andrew hasn't had a chance to rest for a while, and Kristie is concerned about this.

When Andrew responds to her saying that he hopes to get some rest the following day in line 3, Kristie says "must" as a way to express a much stronger directive aspect. Using the word "must" however, is risky, even when used between colleagues of unequal hierarchical power, or as we can see in the example, even in cases when the directive is on the borderline of friendly teasing. Kristie's smiley emoticon following the word "must" achieves two very important functions:

1. It signals her humorous intent.
2. It tones down the commanding nature, the authoritative force, of "must," thus toning down the threat implied by her power over Andrew.

The proof for the existence of the "commanding effect" is clear in Andrew's response in line 5, where he addresses Kristie as "ma'am," signaling his joking submission to her authoritative power. The exchange ends with Kristie's laughter in line 6, affirming that the interaction was intended to be humorous and that the colleagues maintained their collegial relationship. Using the DEANEX method, we can see that removing the emoticon from line 4 makes Kristie suddenly seem more like a boss who gives orders without considering her team members' feelings, even about personal issues such as getting enough rest. It is clear, therefore, that the smiley in this interaction achieves a much more complex effect than depicting humorous intent.

As we can see, the use of emoticons is complex but very useful in communicating subtle interpersonal messages. To use them effectively, it is helpful to think about how they would modify or contribute to the meaning of the written words in an interaction. Table 6.3 provides a good

Table 6.3 The communicative functions of emoticons in workplace e-mails[17]

Marker of positive attitude
Marker of jokes/irony
Used to lessen an impact
Softener: Used with, for example: requests, corrections, rejections, complaints Strengthener: Used with, for example: thanks, greetings, wishes, appraisals, promises, admissions

starting point for thought, but as we saw earlier, applying the DEANEX method is an effective way to expose the range of meanings and functions of emoticons.

Other Ways of Expressing Emotions and Nonverbal Information

Of course, emoticons are not the only way to express emotions or to "inscribe" nonverbal information into our written messages. In fact, research has shown that other strategies, such as ellipsis marks (…), letter repetition, punctuation marks, or the use of capital letters play a much more prominent role than do emoticons.[18] Table 6.4 is a summary of the range of techniques found in digital writing as a resource for the communication of affect, enthusiasm, casualness, and a range of subtle interpersonal messages.

Sadly, the treatment of these emphasis techniques in popular writing and business communication training materials is similar to that of the emoticon: they are often considered as unprofessional, or have just one particular, well-defined meaning assigned to them.

Table 6.4 Writing techniques to express emotion and boost interactivity

1. Written techniques	
Non-lexical tokens	hm, mm, oh, uh, ah, um, errr, erm, yup, yeah,
Interjections and laughter	boo, yuk, phew, oops, woah, awww, aaaa, eugh, hahaha, hehehe, hihi, hee hee
Comic strip sounds	Boing, boom, zzzz, grrrr, argh
Capitalization	all capital letters, lack of/presence of capitalization, unconventional capitalization
Spelling	vocal spelling to imitate dialectal or casual pronunciation (yeez) Nonstandard spelling: letter repetitions—(loooong, gooood morningggg)
2. Punctuation techniques	
Conventional use	as opposed to nonconventional (missing)
Repeated punctuation	repetition, combination (!!!, !!?!), punctuation used as complete messages
Ellipsis mark	…
Other keyboard symbols	brackets, underscores, *, combinations

In Chapter 4, we considered an example in which the use of ALL CAPS went terribly wrong because the writer of the message did not consider the communicative functions such a writing strategy can achieve. Vicki's case reminds us of the aspects of digital writing discussed in Chapter 3: intentionality (the fact that people attribute intention to everything they see in writing) and negativity (namely that people tend to attribute negative meaning or intention more readily than positive meaning). Another lesson we should learn from Vicki's example is that everything we put in writing could function as a contextual cue and can have a range of intertwining functions. When we encounter any of the writing strategies summarized in Table 6.4 in digital business genres, we should stop and consider how they contribute to the meaning of the message. We might find that by using one or more of the strategies, both the content and personal intent of the message are easier for our audience to decipher.

Lessons Learned

In this chapter, we have explored how IM can be used for professional purposes—whether for internal communication or as a tool for customer relation management. We discussed how this recently available channel of communication has led to the development of new communication practices, such as the nonsynchronous use of IM to leave "sticky notes." The most important lesson from this section, perhaps, is the realization that these new practices lead to the questioning of previously existing norms. We cannot be entirely sure about what counts as polite and accepted behavior when using IM for professional purposes. Since guidance is either limited or at times highly prescriptive, the best strategy for people who want to use IM effectively is to develop a reflective practice and remain observant in new encounters (you can try this in Task 6.3). This is particularly important because work groups, institutions, and companies may develop their own norms—both written and unwritten. A failure to pick up on these rules could result in communication breakdown and serious business consequences.

In the previous sections, we looked at the specifics of online conversations. We established that they serve several key functions in a workplace, from enabling people to coordinate work and complete tasks, to establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. At an often subconscious level, conversations are also used to negotiate power and hierarchy and discuss the rules and norms of a workplace or group. Nonverbal signals are key to interpreting complex intentions in communication, but these important signals are somewhat problematic in the digital realm where there is no visual or audio contact between the people who communicate in writing. Communicators can apply various

TASK 6.3

Read the following IM conversation between Elizabeth, a team leader, and Kaithlin, a member of her team.

1. Elizabeth | 10:29 | hello thereeee
2. Kaithlin | 10:29 | Hello there
3. Kaithlin | 10:29 | did you get my triage report yesterday
4. Elizabeth | 10:30 | how are you today? O:-) or >:->?
5. Elizabeth | 10:30 | i did, not opened yet
6. Kaithlin | 10:30 | O:-)
7. Elizabeth | 10:31 | coooool
8. Elizabeth | 10:31 | ok quickie then - any news from the MDW?

(1) Why do you think Elizabeth uses multiplied letters in her messages in line 1 and line 7?

strategies to manage their conversations in an environment in which the signals they normally use for this job are not present. Bad timing and problematic turn-taking can lead to frustration, and “chunking” and the use of nonverbal signals can help online communicators to better manage their conversations.

People can inscribe emotions and other nonverbal signals into their text. Emoticons, along with other writing strategies such as letter repetition, exaggerated punctuation, or ALL CAPS, can take on a very wide range of functions. Several of these functions might have a crucial impact on the effectiveness of work, both internally and in customer relations management. In a high number of professional encounters, such as customer service, counseling, or virtual team discussions, people do not simply need to convey technical or factual information: They must introduce social, or even emotional, elements in order to create favorable impressions.

Apart from impression formation, the "nonverbal" strategies we have discussed can achieve a range of other effects. They can add an affective layer, for example, by marking enthusiasm or a joke, or imply intention, such as collegiality or friendliness. This type of usage can become particularly important from a managerial point of view when interaction involves participants of unequal statuses in the organization. Nonverbal strategies in writing allow persons with the higher hierarchical position to signal their friendly intent, thus lowering the intimidation created by their power—as you can see in Task 6.3.

The most important realization arising from these analyses is the reinforcement of what we discussed in Chapter 3: any linguistic or nonverbal sign can create meaning, and is likely to be interpreted as intentional, often as negative. Use of the DEANEX method offers a simple way to consider how linguistic and nonverbal signs combine to make meaning. Of course, it is not always clear whether users of IM deploy these strategies intentionally, but it is clear that written signs are nonetheless interpreted by the recipients, one way or another. Through the realization that anything we write might have a range of functions in the digital realm, and through exposure to a range of these functions, we are hopefully one step closer to becoming more conscious communicators and professional IM users.

CHAPTER 7

Corporate Communication in the Digital Age

In Chapter 4, we discussed the importance of digital writing in a range of corporate contexts. We looked at how the interactions enabled by the newest digital technologies and social media have become a great opportunity for organizations to engage in intense interaction with their customers and external stakeholders. We also saw, however, how they can make it difficult to maintain a coherent corporate identity and message. The case of lululemon showed how crucial language and the formulation of messages can become in corporate communication, especially when customer retention and loyalty are at stake. We also saw how other factors, such as the timing of messages, can have a serious impact on how customers view corporate communication efforts.

In this chapter, we will discuss in more detail how today's corporate communication differs from what happened before the Internet. We will first examine why corporate communication changed, before exploring the different functions of social media channels. We will then look at how organizations can maintain a conversational voice and engage their audience via new and emerging digital channels and social media platforms.

The Changing Landscape of Corporate Communication

In the pre-Internet era, the channels and direction of communication between companies and their stakeholders were clear and well defined. Apart from "front-stage interactions" (i.e., employees interacting directly with customers during a transaction, such as a purchase) customers had limited interaction with organizations themselves. Companies used a range of one-directional media channels. They implemented corporate strategies to communicate with the outside world, and responses from consumers (such as complaints) were handled behind closed doors. Since the advent of the Internet—and more specifically social media—the relationship between companies and consumers has changed significantly.

The Internet age poses challenges for professional communicators centered around three issues: interaction and interactivity; the blurring of the boundaries between private–public and personal–professional; and the merging of a range of audiences.

Interaction and Interactivity

As the Internet grew, perfectly crafted corporate messages—such as manifestos, reports, newsletters, and even marketing campaigns—gave way to more spontaneous two-directional communication. Consumers can now react to corporate communication efforts instantaneously, and people are not only able, but also keen to interact with brands. They might interact casually or take part in an interchange with higher stakes, such as raising concerns about a product or service or influencing policy making and decisions. Although the latter might seem more important from a corporate communication perspective, the fact is that all communication coming from an organization is under scrutiny from the outside—from social chatter, to responses to a negative review, or official apologies.

A good example of using the power of technology to engage customers is the online interaction of British company Tesco Mobile (Figure 7.1). The company's Twitter account has gained considerable media attention,[1] leading to a greatly increased customer engagement. Labeled as "snarky,"[2] Tesco Mobile's impertinent style has earned it more than 7,000 retweets and 5,000 favorites.

By studying the social media profiles of real organizations, we can take a language-focused approach to determine which strategies for online writing are the most effective, how exactly real interactions happen online, and how we can harness the power of this understanding in our own corporate communication efforts. One such study of selected organizations found that the communication of corporate representatives was motivated by two main principles—upholding social acceptability and promoting credibility.[3] To achieve this, companies used a range of techniques and strategies.

Figure 7.1 Tesco's "snarky" attitude seems to be particularly popular among its followers

To uphold social acceptability, companies:

- Used polite language
- Used strategies to prove that their actions were moral
- Used strategies, such as changing the subject or posting an unexpected response, to divert attention from problematic interactions

To promote their own credibility, company representatives:

- Repeatedly proved that they are experts in their field
- Used techniques to distance themselves from a problematic issue (*let me ask others who know more than me*)
- Expressed sympathy with the customers and distanced themselves from (parts of) the organization they represented (e.g., by ridiculing others in an attempt to undermine their credibility).

TASK 7.1

Revisit the Tesco Mobile tweet in Figure 7.1. Can you identify the strategies used by the company representative to "uphold social acceptability" and "promote their own credibility"?

In another study, researchers examined the responses to negative online reviews and found that the majority of responses followed a similar pattern.[4] They **expressed gratitude** (*Thank you, once again*); **apologized for sources of trouble** (*We are sorry to hear about the experience you had during your stay with us*); and **invited the customer for a second visit** (*We look forward to welcoming you back to our hotel again*). They used **opening pleasantries** (*Dear valued guest*); mentioned **some proof of action** (*We would like to assure you that we have communicated your feedback with the concerned department and corrective actions have been taken*); **acknowledged complaints and feedback** (*We appreciate your feedback as this is our best resource for improving guest services*); **referenced customer reviews** (*We will direct the information about the bathroom and room service that you mentioned to the appropriate department*); and deployed **closing pleasantries** (*Yours sincerely*). They also often talked of **avoiding further problems** (y*our kind feedback enables us to target problem areas and take the necessary actions to ensure similar situations can be avoided in the future*) and **attempted to solicit a response** (*...please contact me at [name@hotel.com] so I can discuss arrangements with you*).

In spite of their seemingly similar structure, though, the researchers identified an important difference between responses to negative online reviews: Some were far more interactive than others in that the messages were clearly tailored to respond to specific individual complaints. The researchers warn us that it is not enough to follow the pattern of other responses to critical reviews; failing to respond to the specific issues raised in complaints can damage your reputation—and not exclusively in the eye of the complaining party, but all the other people who read the interaction. Simply rattling off the same response to every complaint does not work. Customers will soon see through the tactic, as the researchers noted: "Seeing an identical or near-identical response posted in response to several different reviews addressing a variety of issues might raise questions about a business's sincerity in the minds of at least some 'over-hearing' consumers."[5]

The Blurring Boundaries Between Personal/Professional/Public/Private

Due in large part to the extensive use of social media, the previously centralized functions of marketing and public relations have now been decentralized in most contemporary organizations. This change comes as a result of the growth of channels that reach beyond the control of organizations, such as professional and semiprofessional blogs, official and employee Twitter accounts, and community-initiated fan pages. Researchers and business professionals now realize that any stakeholder's online content can have a serious impact on a company's reputation, be he or she the chief executive officer (CEO), an intern, an ex-employee, or a customer.

This influence, of course, works both ways: the "semi-public" online presence of employees or executives can positively affect brand image and increase trust in the brand. Some professionals even go as far as saying that a CEO's online activity has become an essential factor in a company's long-term success. Brandfog, for example, has found that over 80 percent of the surveyed public felt that a CEO's engagement with social media helps to communicate a company's values and shape brand reputation, and over 60 percent of respondents were more likely to purchase from a company whose values and leadership were clearly communicated via social media.[6]

However, the interpersonal interactions enabled by social media and the willingness of chief executives to engage in these discussions can lead to previously unseen communication situations. In the case that follows, for example, the public and stakeholders used social media to actively influence the decision-making process in a well-known brand organization.

Case Study 7.1: The influence of the public in a corporate decision[7]

When Chiquita Brands International, a leading distributor of bananas, salads, and other fresh foods, considered in 2011 whether to relocate its headquarters from Cincinnati, Ohio, to Charlotte, North Carolina, its CEO, Fernando Aguirre, was expected to be at the center of the debate. What he did not expect was that Twitter would become a central communication channel in that debate.

Aguirre had used Twitter for personal communication, but because his posts were public, stakeholders in the relocation decision were able to transform the channel into a forum for professional communication. Twitter enabled stakeholders to argue for or against relocation 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, thus speeding up the pace of the debate. In the past, stakeholders could have phoned, written, or met with the CEO in private, but through social media they could also easily and quickly converse with him in a public way about the eventual decision to relocate to Charlotte.

1. How would you have responded to the volume of tweets if you were the CEO of Chiquita or were on his public relations team?
2. Are you on social media? As a private individual or as a professional? How do you use it?

As the Chiquita example demonstrates, drawing a line between public and private spheres is increasingly difficult, as is distinguishing between a person's professional and personal lives. Prescriptive guides, therefore, that sets out to advise on professional social media behavior is likely to ignore this complexity. As we have established previously, instead of taking a prescriptive approach, it is much more efficient to develop an understanding of the implications of the crossing or blurring of the various boundaries. The quadrants on the image in Figure 7.2 provide a good visualization of where private–public and personal–professional communications intersect. The illustration also serves as a good starting point for understanding the implications of crossing over from one quadrant into another.

The best examples of boundary blurring are cases in which messages not intended for a public audience have become public, with serious consequences. One example case involved Justine Sacco, a PR executive whose offensive tweet about AIDS went viral and got her not only fired but also damaged her professional reputation for many years to come.[9] Although it is misleading to assume that a clear boundary has ever existed between what we consider public and private, the media hype around such cases repeatedly reinforces the reality of our eroded ability to maintain a line between the two.[10]

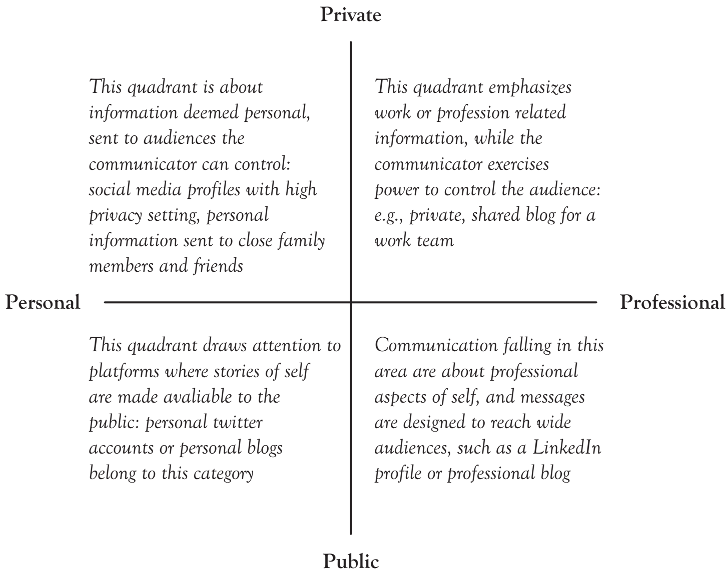

Figure 7.2 The visualization of the various aspects of personal–professional–private–public communication

Source: Adapted from Jameson (2014).[8]

Context Collapse

One of the explanations behind our difficulty in managing the boundaries between private and public is a result of what researchers call a "context collapse." Context collapse happens when the technologies that enable various forms of social media "flatten multiple audiences into one."[11] The result is that people who belong to social groups that would normally be distinct and segmented in everyday life are brought together into one network.

As Marwick and boyd point out (and anyone with a social media account can attest), context collapse can often lead to tensions. When creating content, users "must contend with groups of people they do not normally bring together, such as acquaintances, friends, co-workers and family."[12] Context collapse does not happen in face-to-face, spoken interactions because participants in the conversation generally have a good idea of who is listening and in what capacity.

However, in the digital realm—as we saw in the previous section—managing an audience, and even defining who makes up that audience, has become an exceedingly difficult task. As Caroline Tagg, a researcher of new media communication warns, people easily misunderstand the potentially public reach of their online postings. Quoting examples of employees who have been fired as a result of sharing information via their social media channel, Tagg highlights the fact that some posts may be perfectly acceptable in the eyes of friends and family, or even the public who do not know the person as a representative of a company, but they can be interpreted very differently when read in a work or professional context.[13]

The concept of context collapse has primarily been used in the social sciences to talk about the tension that arises when individual people present different sides of themselves on social media—when an employee uses a Twitter account for both work and personal reasons, for example. But it is also a useful tool for thinking about how organizations communicate with the public. Audiences can span multiple arenas for organizations, just as they can for the individual, and each group represents a different set of expectations and relationships with the organization. In context collapse, the company's own employees, partners, suppliers, loyal customers, unsatisfied customers, potential customers, the press, and the general public all become part of the same audience.

Context collapse means that companies have to navigate these multiple audiences, all within the same communication channel. For a professional communicator, the main issue is that the various audiences have different needs, both in terms of the content they would like to see, and in the language they are comfortable reading or hearing. For instance, using specialist jargon is acceptable when talking primarily to employees about professional issues, but such words will be beyond the understanding of a lay audience.

So what does this mean in practical terms? How can we apply the theory of context collapse in our communication efforts? The first step is to define the audience, as illustrated in Figure 7.3.[14]

By understanding the three different types of audience members that will potentially read our message, we can better design our communication to suit their needs—in terms of content, linguistic form, and privacy.

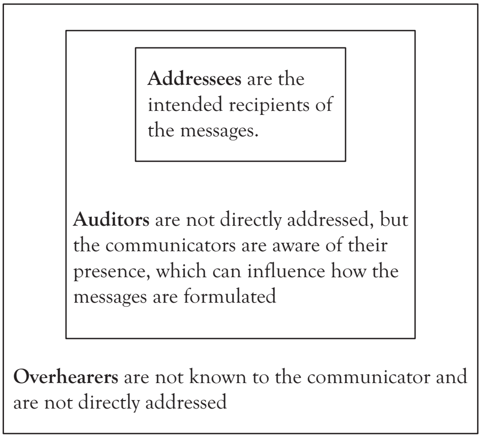

Figure 7.3 Types of audiences

The Functionality of Social Media and Communication

Given the significant changes in the communication landscape, it is not surprising that companies find it hard to keep up with the requirements of the new environment. Complexities in the use of social media and in user-generated content are intimidating for many business players. Executives must have a clear understanding of the complex functionalities of social media in order to develop strategies for effective digital corporate communication across the range of channels and platforms. In their honeycomb framework, Kietzmann and colleagues identify seven main "building blocks" to explain the social media presence, as shown in Figure 7.4.[15]

The honeycomb framework is a useful tool for executives and communication professionals for two reasons. First, it helps us understand how various building blocks affect the design of our communication strategies, and second, it allows us to understand the differences between social media channels. The concept of *identity* draws attention to not only the privacy and confidentiality issues companies need to consider when creating and sharing content with customers, but also to the identity an organization (as a whole or its smaller units) aims to project. The concept of *presence* highlights physical and virtual access to other participants.

We have already touched on the concept of *Reputation* from the point of view of the impressions a company and its corporate communication

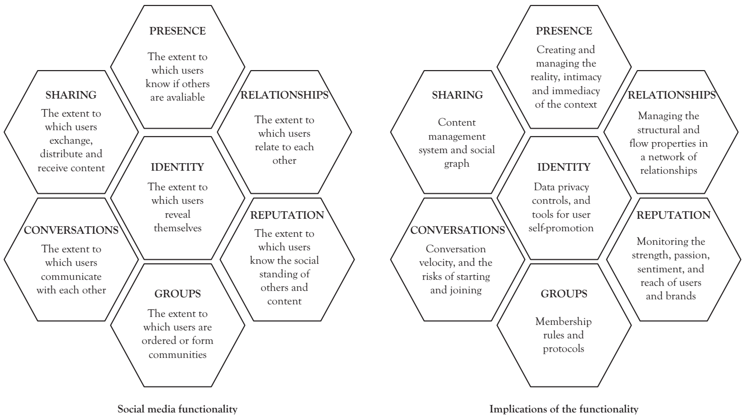

Figure 7.4 The honeycomb of social media functionalities

Source: Reproduced with the permission of Kietzmann et al. (2011).[16]

efforts create. But this concept also entails the reputation generated via the scale of social media presence in general—the number of people associated with the brand and the various levels of engagement with the brand.

The concept of *Conversations* highlights such engagement and focuses attention on the interactions between users of social media. Some channels, such as Snapchat, are designed to facilitate conversations between users. Companies might concentrate on this element by enabling and initiating conversations on their own web surfaces or social media platforms. However, they have to be cautious about the possible pitfalls that could result from such initiatives due to unsanctioned content. A case in point is the incident when Waitrose supermarket invited followers to share why they like to shop at Waitrose under the hashtag #waitrosereasons . Clearly, the PR team was expecting positive tweets, but, instead, the general public used the hashtag to mock the chain's snobbish reputation (see Figure 7.5).

Sharing is another form of engagement. This is the extent to which users share and distribute content, on platforms such as Pinterest, Flickr, or YouTube. Sharing is, in itself, a form of engagement, but it often leads to other forms, such as conversations, or even relationship building. The concept of *Relationships* highlights the extent to which various users, groups, and other professional identities are related to one another. Understanding relationships is crucial when privacy is an issue. The

Figure 7.5 Twitter responses during the failed Waitrose campaign

content people would share with their inner circle of friends and family, for example, is likely to be different from the content they would share with nonmanaged audiences. And apart from the quality, the quantity of relationships also matters for the functionality of social media. The bigger someone's network is, the more influence he or she can achieve through content sharing and conversations.

Finally, the concept of *Groups* enables us to focus our attention on communities. These work like clubs in the real world and can be open, closed (people can only join following approval), or secret (by invitation only). They can center around an interest, lifestyle choice, or demographic. From a professional communication point of view, groups are important because they tend to have their own style and norms of communication, as well as specific rules of social interaction. To understand the differences, compare a fan group for the Twilight films, the supporters of a football club, and the community around a luxury lingerie brand: It is easy to see that although these groups might function on the same principle in gathering people around a brand or product, the way people interact and the accepted communicative behavior (the words they use, the topics they raise, the way questions are asked) are considerably different.

Understanding these social media issues can make or break the success of a corporate message: It can help professionals to decide how to effectively reach existing communities, but equally, they can use this knowledge to facilitate the formation of groups to function as fan communities. The discussion of group-specific norms, for instance, has been found to be a crucial part of forming the group. In a study of an online support group the members of which met via a discussion forum, Graham found that a comment considered impolite by the majority of group members would spark a heated debate, which would in itself enable the people to "grow" into a real group.[17] Based on this realization, organizations can foster the formation of communities by providing them with opportunities to question or discuss what is deemed appropriate by the members. Similarly, the understanding of the group-specific style can ensure that corporate messages find their target audience easily.

Recognizing the "seven building blocks" of social media, namely *identity, presence, reputation, conversations (*or *interactions), content sharing, relationships*, and *groups*, we can see how each is relevant to professional or corporate communication. Each block contains a range of communication issues, but they can also be used in combination to gain a precise picture of what different social media tools are actually designed to do and therefore we can use them most effectively. LinkedIn, for instance, puts the greatest emphasis on identity, but also focuses on relationships and reputation. It is no surprise then that LinkedIn is predominantly used for online work search and as a professional networking tool.

Foursquare, on the other hand, emphasizes presence, with some attention paid to identity and relationships. A private Facebook page has the function of relationships at its heart, while a Facebook page devoted to a group is obviously based around groups and relationships. The emphases are clear if we look at how the public uses these platforms: Foursquare is about announcing where someone is located at a given moment while Facebook is primarily used for maintaining close relationships and for organizational meeting points and announcement boards. Understanding the balance and the different weightings of the building blocks enables online communicators to tailor their communication generally and their messages specifically to suit the functionality of the selected social media platform. Such knowledge also enables them to exploit the affordances in the most effective way and choose the right platform for a particular task.

REFLECTION 7.1

What social media platforms do you use? Do you have the same profile on each of these platforms or are they different?

How do you think about what you use social media for? Do these functions tie in with the building blocks of the honeycomb discussed earlier?

Understanding the importance of the various social media functionalities and their impact on communication strategies is only part of the necessary skill set of an effective online communicator. The other part of the essential skill set is the ability to translate knowledge about communication to the actual formulation of messages—the specific linguistic strategies, word choices, grammar, and the use of other digital cues.

Being Conversational

To become "conversational", marketing scholars Kaplan and Haenlein suggest that we should "be unprofessional" in social media communications. As they say,

> There's no need to spend $100,000 to design the perfect MySpace presence, or hire a professional writer to manage your corporate blog. Instead, try to blend in with other users and don't be afraid to make mistakes! Bill Marriott, Chairman and CEO of the Marriott International Hotel chain, uses his blog, for example, to post regular updates and stories from his travels to Marriott properties around the world—very much in the same way as would a work colleague when describing her last vacation. Social Media users are people like you, who understand that things do not always go smoothly. And, if you're nice to them, they may even give you free advice on how to do it better the next time.[18]

Aside from this advice though, there is little other direction on offer about how to actually achieve this desired "unprofessional" style. Unfortunately, academic scholarship is not of much help either: in public relations literature, for example, "conversational human voice" is described as a set of dispositions—such as treating others as human, being open to dialog, welcoming conversational communication, and providing prompt feedback. Although these guidelines are helpful in understanding the broad aspects of online interaction, they often fail to provide specific advice in how this conversational human voice can be achieved. For such advice, let us turn to linguistics again, and specifically to studies that explore how online reviews achieve the conversational tone of voice.

Vasquez analyzed thousands of online reviews to see what kind of linguistic and discourse strategies are used to reinforce interactivity. What she found—perhaps unsurprisingly—is that people tend to borrow techniques from spoken conversations. Writers use:

- Discourse markers, or words that mark interactivity: *well, oh, I mean, You know*
- Interjections, such as *Hell, Yikes, wow*
- Direct addresses and imperatives, talking to their unknown reader (see Figure 7.3 on the various audiences), *Don't plan on sleeping. Upon closer inspection you will see …*
- Questions, which are aimed to simulate the give-and-take of the conversation, such as *Can you believe that? Would we stay here again?*
- Answers to hypothetical questions, such as "*and yes, I always use an oven thermomether*"
- Questions and answers, like simulated dialogues: "*Would you toss whole strawberries […] into a $40 blender? No.*"[19]

Along with these linguistic techniques, the contextualization cues that we have discussed previously can also add to the level of interactivity and evoke speech-like features. Such cues include

- Enthusiasm markers, for example, multiple punctuation marks (!!!!), ALL CAPS (ENTIRE week), elongated letters (soooooo)
- Backchannel signals
- Emoticons

The aforementioned listings attest to the fact that a good grasp of how language is used in digital settings can equip us with concrete strategies to draw on when formulating our messages so that they sound conversational. Of particular value is the range of techniques available to encode messages about intention, style, emphasis, or intensity. Being able to consciously manipulate the level of interactivity and informality allows professional communicators to gauge their messages to the particular audience to achieve the intended effect, whether it is a flippant tweet or a response to a negative online review.

Practical Applications and Future Challenges

This chapter has been devoted to the exploration of how corporate communication has been affected by computer-mediated and social writing practices. Besides offering a range of theoretical approaches to digital corporate communication, the chapter also set out to provide a wealth of concrete examples and linguistic practices that could be used for effective digital writing. We have seen that the development of new communication technologies and social media platforms, as well as the communication conventions that have evolved alongside them, is unstoppable and fast paced.

The three greatest challenges organizations face are the result of this change: the need for interaction and interactivity, the blurring of the boundaries between private–public and personal–professional, and the merging of a range of audiences that requires corporations to craft their messages so that they are suitable for everyone. In considering these challenges, Lillqvist's framework of corporate communication motivation on social media explains the need to *uphold social acceptability* and to *promote credibility*. From a practical point of view, this framework can be used in professional contexts to analyze previous communications and as a guide for future communication efforts.

When discussing the blurring boundaries between personal, professional, private, and public spheres, Jameson's framework provides a useful tool for visualizing the effects of crossing over the boundaries. New communication channels are very complex. The most important lesson here is that if we would like to succeed on social media as professional communicators, we should not ignore the complexity it creates. Part of the complexity results from the difficulty we face in actually defining our audience when crafting online messages. The concept of context collapse and Bell's categorization of the different audiences can serve as useful tools for visualizing the various audiences and provide helpful reminders when crafting online messages.

The honeycomb framework focuses our attention on the functionalities of various social media channels, paying special attention to how the various building blocks affect or influence communication. Finally, we looked at how our understanding of the concepts and working of communication can be used at a practical level to fine-tune messages to suit the right audiences, achieve the intended goals, and strike the right level of interactivity.

To become a confident digital communicator, however, we need to remember that what might be the latest technology or social media craze one day could have well become obsolete by tomorrow. For professional communicators, it is therefore crucial to develop an observant and critical practice of communication and be ready to adapt to the new developments.

A reflective attitude is important at a personal level and essential at the organizational level. Companies should be prepared to provide sufficient resources to develop a communication strategy that flexibly responds to the changing landscape of communication. These resources include, for example, people who can make sense of the information companies gather from listening in to consumer-generated content, as well as people who can create content that reflects this knowledge.

CHAPTER 8

From Theory to Practice

At the beginning of this book, we considered an approach to becoming a critically aware communicator by observing how communication happens in real life and learning about the theories that underpin it. The kind of instructions and do-and-don't lists often found in popular literature, and even in professional training, do not always result in effective language use or communication. Quite the contrary: If we are not aware of the complexity of language and communication, we lack flexibility and awareness and might send out unintended messages or communicate in a way that leads to misinterpretation and conflict.

The main aim of the language-centered approach presented in this book is to develop a conscious, "noticing" communication practice. This is a practice that goes beyond habit, routine, trial and error, and worse, popular guidelines that lack scientific grounding. It is a practice based on noting small details and questioning previously unchallenged assumptions.

This approach is particularly important in an era in which communication and language are technical skills in high demand. In the United States, strong communication skills are among the top requirements for 83 percent of hiring managers,[1] while in the United Kingdom, soft skills such as these are now thought to be worth more than £88 billion Gross Value Added to the economy each year.[2] In customer-relation jobs, strong communication skills and good linguistic abilities have already become a commodity—a necessity, even—for organizations that do not want to be left behind. Czerniawska aptly points out that in order "to turn language into a truly competitive weapon in practical business, we need to start being more aware of the language we, our colleagues and our competitors use," especially so that we can "see it for what it really is": to understand the complexities inherent in the layers of communication goals, the transactional, work-related messages intertwined with the negotiation of power, the signaling of professional identities, and the setting of norms.[3] Only then will we be able to fully exploit the potential of language.

Throughout the book, we have focused on raising awareness, with digital communication being our focus. In each chapter, we have seen how theory, research findings, and the practice of reflective communication can lead to effective digital communication. In this final chapter, we will consider how important conclusions from the previous discussions and case studies can be transferred into practice.

Case Studies Revisited: CC Power Play

We started the book with an exercise from a traditional professional communication training book and considered the most appropriate e-mail message in a professional workplace. We saw from the e-mails used in the example that communicative encounters have various layers and functions beyond the transactional, verbatim content of the texts. We saw that communication is only partly about content—the other part is made up of "relational" or "meta" messages, which are equally important—and sometimes more so—than the actual content itself.

We must remember, however, that by using the binary labels of "transactional" and "relational," it might seem that these functions occur separately. This is not the case. Sociolinguists and social communication scholars have long known that everything we say or write in an interpersonal interaction is multifunctional, which means that our sentences serve several functions at once. Parallel to the transactional content of the message, we signal our personal and professional identities and which groups we (aspire to) belong to; and we negotiate our relationships and power and signal urgency, engagement, and enthusiasm.

This multifunctionality of language is an important realization, especially in light of the advice often given to digital communicators to use "low bandwidth" (purely text-based) digital channels such as e-mail only for "straightforward" messages.[4] The reason given in such resources is that these channels are less suited for interpersonal interactions due to their inability to convey emotional information.[5] As we saw, however, this is not the case. It *cannot* be the case because interpersonal interactions will inevitably carry a whole range of meta-messages. Failing to be aware of these intertwining layers of communication at work can lead to miscommunication and perhaps more serious consequences affecting teamwork and efficiency.

To see such a case of miscommunication, let us revisit the case study in Chapter 5: the e-mail exchange between a university administrator and a university lecturer. In the exchange, Joe sends a short message to his colleague reminding her of a looming deadline.

FROM: Joe XX <Joe.XX@firm.com>
CC: Katherine, Margaret
SUBJECT: Submission deadline
Dear Katherine,
You have yet to collect your Dissertation Formative Assessment work from Room 301; please do this as soon as possible as I believe the marks are due to Margaret by tomorrow.
Regards,
Joe
Course Administrator

On the surface, the message is short and gets to the point. It is straightforward and contains all the information needed for the work process to progress—it conveys the urgency of the situation and the specifics of the work that needs to be done. If we look closer, we can also see how Joe is actually making an effort to balance the directive intention of the message with the disadvantage of him being at a lower hierarchical position than his addressee. His use of "yet to collect" merely infers a command instead of directly expressing an order. He then adds a formulaic politeness expression "please," as well as an expression "I believe," which serves to mitigate the force of the directive intent of the whole message.

However, Joe's effort to play out deferential politeness seems to be overridden by his act of copying Margaret in as an additional recipient of his message. He did not refer to Margaret in the message nor seek to justify the decision to copy her in; so his intention is open to a broad range of interpretations. If we recall the three factors that influence our interpretation of digital messages—intentionality, negativity, and politeness (as discussed in Chapter 3)—it is not surprising that Katherine sees Joe's communication as inappropriate:

> FROM: Katherine@firm.com
> CC: Joe
> SUBJECT: Re: Submission deadline
> Dear Joe
> I really appreciate your concern, but I find your method of copying Margaret in the e-mail a rather childish and intimidating procedure. Your effort to remind me is greatly appreciated but can I please ask you to leave it up to me when and how I do my job. As far as I am concerned you are neither my line manager nor some sort of task-master to keep an eye on my deadlines.
> Best wishes,
> Katherine

What we see in Katherine's response is that she thought Joe's communication was inappropriate because Joe went beyond his role by directing her and more importantly, by pulling in an auditor (Chapter 7) as a witness—perhaps to cover his back. What Katherine is perhaps trying to do in her response to Joe is to reestablish or reposition their roles, by drawing attention to the inappropriateness of his act, given his position as a junior administrator. Such implicit power negotiations can easily lead to more serious interpersonal conflict. In the case of Joe and Katherine, it resulted in disciplinary procedures, with detrimental effects on the motivation and effective collaboration of the work team.

The take-home message of this case is that there are no "straightforward," "clean," or merely transactional messages. By creating texts online, whether for private, internal, or external professional purposes, the author defines himself or herself and his or her relationship with the receiver through the specific linguistic choices he or she makes. A skilled communicator thus needs to possess the ability to communicate the transactional content information precisely, combined with the meta-messages that ensure that he or she maintains good, collegial relationships with others at work.

Case Studies Revisited: Hmm

It is specifically the aforementioned meta-messages that might constitute a problem in the online realm, because in real life these are often only communicated via nonverbal or paralinguistic channels such as facial expressions, gestures, or tone of voice. Researchers of organizational interaction have long realized the problems caused by the lack of these cues in digital business and professional communication, as we considered previously.

But when talking about nonverbal cues in digital communication, organizational or communication literature does not seem to treat them in a way that reflects their importance. Researchers view online writing as "impoverished," with nonverbal nuances only replaced by "low-quality, time consuming substitutes." Based on this dismissive and simplified view, it is not a surprise that communication training guides have taken an overgeneralizing and prescriptive approach, advising professional communicators, for example, to avoid ALL CAPS, emoticons, acronyms, and any other form of informality.

Throughout the book, we have seen that the range of writing strategies used to convey meta-messages are an organic and essential part of digital writing. The DEANEX method can help guide our writing strategies, techniques, and choices. The method highlights aspects of messages that might otherwise pass unnoticed. And by manipulating the messages, we can understand how various cues might function in the interaction. In the case study in Chapter 3, we applied the technique to an official corporate message from Twitter.

This manipulation of the text in Figure 8.1 focused on "Hmm"—a backchannel signal we discussed in Chapter 2. In speech, "hmm" has a wide range of functions, such as signaling that we have understood a message or to convey to conversation partners that we are in the process of thinking. It can also function as a cue when we are about to say something that contradicts with what our partner has just said. We use the "hmm" token to weaken the tension that occurs as a result of the contradiction. The comparison of the two versions of the pop-up message from Twitter shows that although "hmm" is not an essential part of the message in terms of the content it works to soften the effect of the bad news that

Figure 8.1 Manipulation of the language of a pop-up announcement

there has been a technical glitch. The addition of "Hmm" is also a good way for an official announcement to sound conversational, informal, and accessible—a requirement brought about by the increased use of social media, as we discussed extensively in Chapter 7. The ever-growing number of official messages that contain similar tokens or markers is good evidence for the need to be interactive and conversational in corporate communications. And this is spreading to the offline world, too—as you can see in the examples in Figure 8.2.

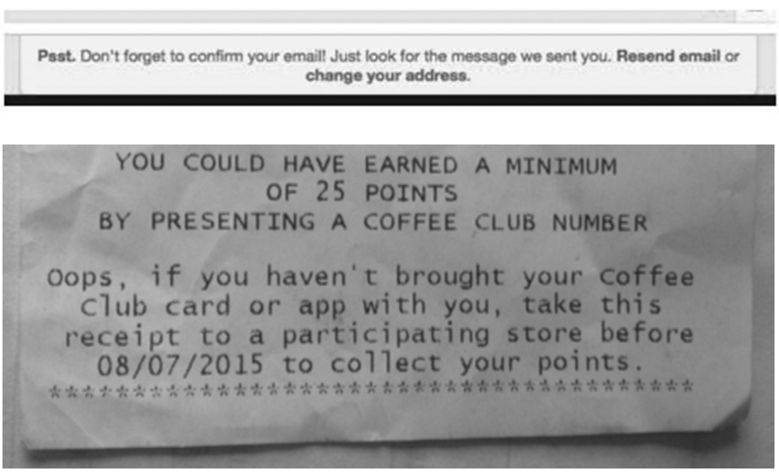

Figure 8.2 Screenshot of an announcement from Pinterest and a message on a coffee shop invoice

We can now see that if communicators are aware of the range and function of cues that represent nonverbal signs, they can use them to fine-tune their messages to suit the particular audiences, achieve their intended goals, and achieve the right level of interactivity.

Case Studies Revisited: Managing a Team Online

Of course, understanding the importance of cues that could increase the conversational nature of texts, or inscribe attitude are just as important in interpersonal interactions. Cues that signal enthusiasm and involvement can seriously affect both how we understand what the conversation is about, how we perceive our partners, and how much we enjoy the tasks at hand. For example, we know that people who talk online enjoy conversations more if they are quicker (more words per minute), if there are more references to the current ongoing interaction or shared knowledge (measured by the use of "the") or if more assent words (such as *I agree, yes*) are used.[6]

We also know that for some people, the lack of cues that would normally signal emotions or involvement might be interpreted as a sign of apathy or negativity. They would, therefore, include these cues in their messages even though they do not signal enthusiasm or emotion.[7] In practice, understanding the importance of these strategies could be particularly useful in customer-facing roles or for managers of virtual teams who aspire to establish a collegial, supportive relationship within the group. In Chapter 6 we looked at an extract from a conversation between virtual team member Kaithlin and her manager, Elizabeth.

1. Elizabeth | 10:29 | hello thereeee
2. Kaithlin | 10:29 | Hello there
3. Kaithlin | 10:29 | did you get my triage report yesterday
4. Elizabeth | 10:30 | how are you today? O:-) or >:->?
5. Elizabeth | 10:30 | i did, not opened yet
6. Kaithlin | 10:30 | O:-)
7. Elizabeth | 10:31 | coooool
8. Elizabeth | 10:31 | ok quickie then - any news from the MDW?

In the ethos of a conventional communication textbook this extract includes a range of violations against what would be considered as "professional" digital communication. Yet, by looking at it through the lens of communication theory and language, the strategies used by Elizabeth are not only appropriate, but important in situations when people have to establish and maintain a friendly relationship over the Internet. In multiplying the vowels in lines 1 and 7, by using a range of emoticons (line 4) and fragmented sentences (line 5), not only does she create an informal atmosphere, but skillfully prepares the ground for the introduction of the more serious business matter in line 8. This is an excellent example of the work people can invest in if they want to carefully balance the need to get the work done and maintain a friendly atmosphere within a team.

This workplace example is also a good reminder of the importance of language, for example, the words chosen or type of grammar: communicators using digitally mediated communication tools for interpersonal interaction should remember that the language they use to formulate their messages plays a crucial part in how those messages and communicative intentions are perceived.

Next Steps

In Chapter 2, we considered the analogy of language as a windowpane. It is barely noticed but significantly affects how we view reality. Throughout the book, we have seen that by focusing on the windowpane, by examining language in action, we can expose and question what is presented to us as reality. We have looked at examples of real language use; read about theories underpinning practice; and used a new method to deconstruct, analyze, and explain the linguistic and discourse strategies. We have hopefully learned how to take a step back, notice the glass, and learn from what we have discovered.

Readers who would like to maintain this practice in order to perfect their digital communication skills, and those who are interested in how language works in other areas, can turn to a wide range of resources, including the following:

Work Communication. Mediated and Face-to-Face Practices by Maureen Guirdham. In this volume, the author focuses on interpersonal communication at work, providing a very comprehensive description of many aspects of interpersonal communication, including management and leadership, conflict, teamwork, intercultural communication, and impression management. The book combines theory and practice, and offers a thorough review of the most recent scholarship in an accessible language. I highly recommend this book for any reader who needs to interact with people as part of his or her work, and would like to have a better understanding of some of the social, cultural, cognitive, and linguistic aspects of interpersonal interaction.[8]

Communication and Language. A Handbook of Theory and Practice by Neil Thompson. Written by a practitioner, this book provides a very accessible introduction to communication and language. The author untangles a range of concepts—such as how communication, language, culture, and identity relate to one another—and demonstrates how theories can be applied in practice. The book includes a number of case studies to illustrate the main points and provides an opportunity for the reader to link what he or she has learnt to real-life situations. This is an excellent publication for those professionals who would like to improve their own communicative practice by developing a deeper understanding of the complexities and subtleties of communication.[9]

Why Do Linguistics? Reflective Linguistics and the Study of Language by Fiona English and Tim Marr. This publication advocates the reflective linguistic practice we have taken in this book. It discusses how language works through real-life examples taken from a wide variety of sources, from signs to advertisements, from blogs to the written media and spoken interactions. Importantly, the book introduces frameworks, or toolkits, for those aspiring to dig even deeper into language analysis. I would highly recommend this book for readers who use language as a tool in their everyday practices: marketers, copywriters, social media managers, and professionals in similar roles. Equally, I would recommend it to readers who are interested in learning more about viewing the world through the lens of language and would like to extend their exploration beyond the digital realm.[10]

Conclusion

In Chapter 3, we considered the immigrant analogy to refer to people inhabiting the virtual space, and have shown that the path they take to learn about how things are done in this new realm is far from straightforward. It is important to remember that, just as for real-life immigrants, our learning of the new culture and new conventions can never be complete. The knowledge to be gained is endless in a world that constantly evolves. The environment itself, the culture, the rules, and the norms are always in a state of flux.

What we can do is develop a conscious attitude to communication, and to understand how it works and why. It is wrong to think that understanding the theory of communication and the rules of language will automatically make us better communicators, but becoming aware of how communication happens will. This is because it will make us revisit and question our own communication efforts, the choices we make when designing a message, and the possible interpretations of our texts.

There is no doubt that computer-mediated technologies create more opportunity for misunderstanding than do traditional means of communication, as we repeatedly discussed throughout the book. This is partly due to the lack of direct audiovisual contact and the absence of norms and conventions that would normally form a basis for mutual understanding between people. But we can avoid being passive victims of these problems by adapting our communicative behavior to the specific media requirements. We can become competent digital communicators by developing reflective communication practice and learning about the ins and outs of digital communication. I hope this book serves as a good first step to achieving this, and that you found the reflective communication approach effective and useful to carry on using beyond the digital realm.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Hafner and Lyon (1998).
2. DuFrene and Lehman (2011).
3. Holmes (2006).
4. Cornelissen (2014).
5. Hulme (2014).
6. Project Management Institute (May 2013).
7. Mackey (2005).
8. Hewings and Hewings (2005).
9. Kietzmann et al. (2011).

Chapter 2

1. Radicati and Levenstein (2013).
2. Bargiela-Chiappini (2009).
3. Holmes and Stubbe (2003).
4. Cook (2004).
5. Thompson (2003).
6. RW3 Cultural Wizards (2010).
7. Skovholt, Grønning, and Kankaanranta (2014).
8. Ledbetter (2008); Rooksby (2002).

Chapter 3

1. Gumperz (1982, 173).
2. Gumperz (1982, 132).
3. Marvin (1995).
4. Crystal (2001).
5. Adkins and Brashers (1995); Lewin-Jones and Mason (2014); Thompson (2003).
6. Byron (2008).

7. Walther and D'Addario (2001).
8. Tannen (2013).
9. Tracy and Robles (2009).
10. Holmes and Stubbe (2003).
11. Darics (2015).
12. Czerniawska (1997).
13. Levinson (2003).
14. Thompson (2003, 129).
15. Gumperz (1992, 51).

Chapter 4

1. Hulme (2014, 13).
2. Edelson et al. (2015).
3. Watson-Manheim and Belanger (2002).
4. Berry (2011, 202).
5. Garfield (2010); Lewis (2009).
6. Creelman (2015).
7. https://youtu.be/u4jIBlTIkSk
8. Hesse (2013).
9. Page (2014).
10. Hulme (2014, 13).
11. Cornelissen (2014).

Chapter 5

1. Hafner and Lyon (1988, 189).
2. Dürscheid and Frehner (2013).
3. Radicati and Levenstein (2013).
4. Crystal (2001, 125).
5. *The Economist* (1996).
6. Baron (1998); Cho (2010); Gimenez (2000).
7. Ledbetter (2008).
8. Kalman and Rafaeli (2011).
9. Baron (2002).

10. Lewin-Jones and Mason (2014, 82).
11. Skovholt and Svennevig (2006).
12. Sawer (2005).
13. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007).
14. Crystal (2001, 121).
15. Luckhurst (2014).
16. Skovholt and Svennevig (2006, 61).
17. Dabbish et al. (2005). Nakajima (1988).

Chapter 6

1. Hoang and Radicati (2011).
2. Flynn (2010).
3. Darics (2015).
4. Herring (1999).
5. Isaacs et al. (2002).
6. Isaacs et al. (2002).
7. Rennecker and Godwin (2003).
8. Edwards (2013).
9. Mackiewicz and Lam (2009, 424).
10. Markman (2015).
11. Simpson (2005).
12. Carey (1980, 67).
13. Zhang, Erickson, and Webb (2011).
14. Darics (2010).
15. Skovholt, Grønning, and Kankaanranta (2014).
16. Walther and D'Addario (2001).
17. Skovholt, Grønning, and Kankaanranta (2014).
18. Vandergriff (2013).

Chapter 7

1. Tesco Mobile Enters Hilarious Debate with Jaffa Cakes, Yorkshire Tea on Twitter (2013); Ciambriello (2013).
2. Feloni (2013).
3. Lillqvist and Louhiala-Salminen (2014).

4. Zhang and Vásquez (2014).
5. Zhang and Vásquez (2014, 62).
6. BRANDfog (2014).
7. Jameson (2014).
8. Image based on Jameson (2014).
9. Darics (2014).
10. Tagg (2015, 69).
11. Marwick and boyd (2011, 122).
12. Marwick and boyd (2011, 122).
13. Tagg (2015).
14. Bell (1984).
15. Kietzmann et al. (2011).
16. Kietzmann et al. (2011).
17. Graham (2007).
18. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010).
19. Vasquez (2015); Vasquez (2014).

Chapter 8

1. Millennial branding and Beyond.com (2014).
2. The Value of Soft Skills to the UK Economy (2015).
3. Czerniawska (1997, 13).
4. Treviño, Webster, and Stein (2000).
5. Rice and Love (1987).
6. Nguyen and Fussell (2015).
7. Tannen (2013).
8. Guirdham (2015).
9. Thompson (2003).
10. English and Marr (2015).

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Erika Darics, PhD, is a researcher at the Centre for Critical Inquiry into Society and Culture at Aston University, UK, and a consultant for organizations on internal and external communication issues. She is an interdisciplinary scholar working at the intersection of three fields: discourse, communication, and organizational studies. Her published work has also appeared in the *International Journal of Business Communication* and the *Journal of Politeness Research*, among other outlets. @LinguaDigitalis

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