A genre Analysis of the Scholarly Electronic Mail: Implications for Pedagogy

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Abstract: Scholarly mails apparently display stable conventional principles as an emerging genre. Thus, contributors should structure their electronic mails appropriately when writing for purposes of discussing professional topics. However, this requirement plunges many a scholar in dilemma as to how to go about this vital undertaking without written structural norms in electronic mail communication. This raises the question: what is the generic structure of the scholarly electronic mail? The aim of this paper therefore is to uncover the organizational structure of the scholarly electronic mail as an emerging genre of computer mediated discourse. A qualitative approach is adopted in the description of the generic structure. Through purposive and stratified sampling, twenty scholarly electronic mails were selected and closely studied based on the basic electronic schema model by Herring (1996) with a view to extracting the features of the genre. Findings revealed that the scholarly electronic mail has a generic structure which is signalled by typical linguistic elements. The paper recommends a genre-based approach to guiding upcoming scholars on how to construct a scholarly electronic mail that fulfils its communicative purposes.

Keywords: Generic Structure, Virtual Discourse Community, Macro Segments, Discussants, Reactive Mail, Schema.

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Introduction

Electronic mail is considered as an internet technology used for interpersonal communication. Both computer technology and mobile telephony represent what has been called the "new media" during the last decade. It plays an important role in meeting the needs of the globalised information society. For instance, in the year 2000, it was estimated that 90% of web users connected to the internet primarily to view and send electronic mail (NUA, 2000). Moreover, broad band usage is also increasing with developing markets such as China and India predicting further growth in electronic mail usage (European Travel Commission, 2010). Additionally, Vilmi (1994) argues that global communication through electronic mail encourages students to practice writing by communicating with other students. Similarly, Shammon (1998) states that electronic mail is highly focused, formal and topical and should therefore have a strong place in writing across the curriculum theory and practice. The growth of the electronic mail is also underscored by Shulman (2001) who contends that distance learning through electronic mail affords both students and teachers opportunities to enhance the chances of successful learning. Thus, research in electronic mail could prove to be an important tool for researchers and scholars in their attempt to establish the new discoveries and ideas, practices and theories within the new media platform. Accordingly, research writers will find information on generic structure helpful as they explore the generic structure patterns available to them in their disciplines.

However, despite the crucial role played by generic structure in scholarly electronic mail, text analysis research has largely pivoted on written texts and not internet communication. In its own right, internet communication has generated a new type of text which also requires to be studied in order to determine its linguistic aspects.

The importance of generic structure has been underscored in the literature. For example, Couture (1986) has argued that genres operate at the level of discourse structure marked by a beginning, continuing, and an ending. Genre analysis, in examining and identifying generic structure of texts, has greatly influenced the teaching of English for academic purposes and in developing tertiary students' control over academic discourse (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998; Swales, 1990).

Ho, (2002), Luppicini (2007), and Androutsopoulos (2006) argue that studies in computer-mediated discourse are generally aimed at determining the nature of discourse generated. The studies determine how discourse differs from other types (oral and/or written) and the extent to which written or spoken linguistic features are evident. It follows that the

basic electronic message has a schema. According to Herring (1996) and Ess and Sudweeks (2006), such messages are internally organized texts. Such an internal structure is signalled by writers not only on micro and macro levels but also through different aspects of semiosis (rhetorical structures and generic stages). As a result, insights about these structures can be gleaned using methods of text analysis.

Longacre (1992) and Swales (1990) have observed that informational texts tend to be organized as expository essays or reports. On the other hand, interactive texts tend to be organized as conventional turns or personal notes. More importantly, each of these text-types has a distinctive schematic organization, or conventional sequence of functional moves into which the text can be chunked (Garcia, Standlee, & Beckoff, 2009).

Genre analysis adds to the understanding of how language is used within an important discourse community. According to Swales (1990), genre analysis is a model of applied linguistics in its best sense. The field draws on linguistic and sociolinguistic theory to clarify the nature of language use and language learning in an educational setting. Genre-centred approach therefore offers a workable way of making sense of the myriad communicative events that occur in the contemporary English writing environments.

While literature recognizes the importance of computer-mediated communication (see Lippicini, 2007; Ess & Sudweeks, 2006; Androutsopoulos, 2006; Garcia, Standlee, & Beckoff, 2009), little is known about the scholarly electronic mail in terms of its rhetorical structure and communicative purposes. This underscores the urgency for uncovering its structural characteristics of the scholarly electronic mail to ensure high quality texts that fulfil their communicative purposes.

The call for a shift of focus into computer-mediated communication perhaps stems from the observation that recent genre studies have concentrated on texts in print. For instance, Dobakhti (2016) described discussion sections of qualitative research articles in applied linguistics while Al-Khasawneh (2017) focused on research article abstracts. Earlier, Sadeghi and Samwel (2013) had analysed the generic structure of letters of appeal. The 21st Century has been identified as the fourth industrial revolution driven by developments in information, technology and communication, causing a dramatic shift to electronic means of communication. Being a new mode of sharing information, there is an urgent need to research into emerging computer-mediated genres.

LINGUISTlist, LinkedIn and other new media platforms have led to the establishment of professional groups to discuss issues of mutual interest to the members. LINGUISTlist, for

example, has a robust group of linguists that discusses issues around the levels and branches of linguistics. With more and more members getting enjoined into such groups, are new members aware of the compositional characteristics of such genres exploited by the groups as the scholarly electronic mail? This paper argues that scholars need to be familiar with the structure of the scholarly electronic mail in order to generate posts that meet their peers' expectations. The paper analyses the distinctive functional moves of the genre using the basic electronic message schema as the benchmark. In effect, uncovering the generic structure of the scholarly electronic mail will accurately inform the virtual discourse community about the rhetorical structure that will help them to maintain the norms of the community and produce texts that fulfil their intended purposes.

Method

The sample

Twenty scholarly electronic mails posted between 2006 and 2009 were selected from five different themes in LINGUISTlist. In each of the five themes, four mails were selected, making a total of twenty. Accordingly, Theme One was entitled *uneducated families means non- complex language* and coded as T1 to T4. Theme Two was *prestige and language maintenance* and coded as T5 to T8. Theme Three was *free sharing of linguistic research*, T9 to T12. Theme Four was *review of Chomsky minimalism* as T13 to T16 and Theme Five was *an intelligent man's answer to linguistic truism*, T17 to T20. From each of the five cohorts, any four electronic mails were selected. The assumption guiding this sample size was that the scholarly electronic mail constituted a genre. Previous research has shown that there are certain shared high frequency structural features that are readily employed by producers each time they want to create a genre. This quality gives a genre some degree of stability. Working by this argument, a genre-based study can still yield credible results even with a small sample. For instance, in a study that involved uncovering variations in the use of metadiscourse across six disciplines in the University of Michigan, Swales (1990, p. 188) analysed six texts. Secondly, it is argued (see Hyland 2005, p. 181) that a large corpus of texts does not necessarily represent a genre any better than a small corpus because of the recursive nature of rhetorical features of the genre. Sample texts in this study were selected from a short period of three years (2006-2009) in order to mitigate any effects arising from generational changes to the genre.

Data collection procedures

A three-part schema by Herring (1996) was used to elicit and sort out the linguistic data for analysis. The three parts of the schema are:

(a) Link to an earlier message,

(b) Expression of views

(c) Appeal to other participants.

However, close reading of the selected texts revealed a tendency to have an opening and closing as a communicative function. For the purposes of this study, the new feature representing this communicative function was named the epistolary move. Herring's (1996) three-part schema was also found to correspond to introduction, body and conclusion sections of the mails. Taking Herring's (1996) three parts as communicative functions, a new schema was developed as summarised in Table 1 (see Appendix).

Following the schema in Table 1, all the selected mails were closely read to identify the linguistic signalling devises in each of the four moves. For triangulation purposes, the two researchers worked individually on the selected electronic mails and came up with an inventory of the elements of the organizational structure of the genre and corresponding communicative functions. Macro segments that marked opening epistolary convention were *salutation* and *thematic thread* while those that marked the closing epistolary convention were: *complimentary close, signature* and *reference*. Macro segments in Introduction were: *direct* and *indirect quotation*. The body was marked by macro segments such as *expression of views*, *expression of feelings*, *providing information* or *solutions* and *asking rhetorical questions*. The conclusion was marked by rhetorical questions and providing of ideation content. For triangulation purposes, the researchers compared and contrasted their analyses. Where discrepancies were identified, they were discussed till a consensus was reached. This process led to inventories of linguistic features signalling the schematic elements of the electronic mail.

Data analysis procedures

The final lists of linguistic features signalling the discrete components of each of the twenty electronic mails were shared between the researchers for content analysis. This analysis involved picking a feature and establishing its location and relative frequency across the scholarly electronic mails studied. Our assumption was that the most frequently employed linguistic feature is typical of the scholarly electronic mail as a genre. Thus, the emerging

patterns provided insights into the compositional characteristics of the *introduction*, *body* and *conclusion* sections of the scholarly electronic mail. The findings were discussed and explained in relation to existing literature.

Results and Discussion

Generic structure in scholarly electronic mail

Findings showed that the scholarly electronic mail has a conventional sequence. In the study corpora, mails exhibited epistolary conventions both at the beginning and at the end. Scholarly mails were also found to have an introduction based the topic being discussed. Thirdly, new content into the discussion was introduced in the body of the mail. However, some mails provided the content at the beginning and at the end of the mail thus signalling the conclusion of the mail. Lastly, mails revealed a conclusion signalled by different macro segments. Details of these findings are presented in the sections that follow.

Opening Epistolary Conventions

Data for this study revealed that the generic structure of scholarly electronic mail contains opening epistolary conventions. These are peripheral slots which add to the interactional dimension of electronic mails (Hwang, 1998). Waldvogel (2007) notes that epistolary conventions comprise *greetings* and *closings*. He adds that the conventions perform important social roles just as in other forms of interactions. In addition, Kankaanranta (2005) notes that salutations, closings and signatures frame electronic messages as being relational and involved. In the study reported in this paper, the opening epistolary conventions were identified and sorted out as *salutation* and *thematic thread* as discussed below:

Salutation

Salutation in scholarly electronic mail is used by discussants to express feelings of close contact with other members of the mailing list. According to Kankaanranta (2005), the use of salutations by discussants helps them to construct a relationship with the recipient thus contributing to the maintenance of good social relations. An example drawn from the study data is presented below:

(1) *Dear colleagues* (T9)

The salutation in example (1) calls the attention of the virtual discourse community in the relevant discipline and fulfils the role of phatic communion which entails the creation and maintenance of social relations.

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Thematic thread

Thematic thread was realized as website link which is provided automatically by the mailing list. According to Herring (1996), a header is automatically added to each message by the electronic mailer and it includes; the source of the message, the thematic thread, the recipient of the message, the date and the time of posting. The discussants used the website link as an opening convention to refer other discussants to the thematic thread of the ongoing discussion. The provision of the website link is an indicator of the need for professionalism when discussing professional issues. This is illustrated by example (2):

    (2) *Uneducated families means non-complex language*
Monday, 24th April 2009
Listserve.linguistlist.org
Discussant (A)T (1)

    It can be noted from example (2) that thematic thread, in line with Herring (1996), includes a header (Uneducated families means non-complex language) and other reference items such as date and electronic link.

Closing epistolary convention

Cho (2010) observes that leave taking formulas could be evidence that social and expressive needs sometimes outweigh the principle of linguistic economy. This is equally noted by Waldvogel (2007) who asserts that closing epistolary conventions perform important social roles just as in other forms of interactions. Closings are relational and involve others in conversations as illustrated in the following section:

Complimentary close

This is a form of closing formula or a farewell to the recipients of the mail. According to Waldvogel (2007), a complimentary close can consolidate the relationship of discussants and help establish a relational basis for future encounters. Consider example (3) drawn from the study data:

    (3) *All the best to linguists everywhere* (T20)

Example (3) expresses a cordial overtone which aims at consolidating the ties that bind the virtual community of linguists. Another closing epistolary convention is the signature which is addressed below.

Signature

Signatures at the end of an electronic message are types of identification of the sender (Crystal, 2001). Signatures could be electronic, personal names, initial(s) followed by name or even one name. Consider example (4):

(4) *C. Rajendran* (T7)

It can be noted in (4) that an initial of the author is presented followed one name. Provision of a name demonstrates that the mailer takes responsibility for the content in his post and is willing to be engaged by other scholars in future. Another element of the closing epistolary convention was reference as discussed below.

Reference

This element entailed the provision of bibliographical reference(s) at the end of the electronic mail posting. Bibliographical references are formal indicators that researchers use either to provide prove that they have knowledge of people who have published in a particular field of research or to refer their readers to a particular work for further information. Example (5) illustrates this:

(5) *Kravchenko, A.V. (2007, to appear). Essential properties of language, or, why language is not a code, Language Sciences 29 (1)* (T19)

Provision of a reference not only discourages academic dishonesty but refers the virtual discourse community to a source that authenticates one's views regarding the theme under discussion. The following section discusses the Introduction move of the scholarly electronic mail.

(a) Introduction

A closer reading of all the scholarly electronic mails revealed that discussants used either *explicit* or *implicit* reference to a previous message to introduce their discussion. According to Crystal (2001) and Herring (2010), a common technique for introducing a message is to use an explicit reference to a previous message which is usually in the form of a quotation or a paraphrase. He further notes that it is important for discussants to make continued use of the subject description because it enables groups of related messages to be placed together. Discussants can therefore introduce their discussion by the use of a quotation or a paraphrase. Section 3.4.1 shows how direct quotation can be used.

Direct quotation

Direct quotation is the inclusion of part of a previous posting in the actual message. According to Herring (1996), direct quotation is the standard way of including the referred text into the actual message in most electronic mail programmes. Each quoted line of the message from the actual text is marked by means of the alphanumeric sign (>). For example:

(6) *>I am curious what other linguists think about the research to which*

>this newspaper article refers (T2)

A direct quotation such as expressed in (6) provides the basis upon which mailers will place their contributions.

Indirect quotation

This is when the discussant refers back to a message without making use of the built-in software function for replying. According to Gruber (2008), the discussant can either quote the name of the author of the previous message or instead, use a paraphrase of the previous contribution as expressed in Examples (7) and (8) below:

(7) I have nothing to say *... on the subject*, but I was reminded of … (T3)

(8) But don't *Anonby's observations* support in a sense the idea of prestige and language maintenance (T6)

It can be noted that a mailer paraphrases the subject under discussion or quotes the name of the author as expressed in Examples (7) and (8) respectively**.**

(b) Body

According to Herring (1996), the body of an electronic mail refers to statements of ideation where discussants express their views about a topic and what other discussants have said about it. This reciprocal relationship reflects early action recognition and immediate planning of responses addressed in Bogels and Levinson (2017). Herring further notes that a message with no ideation content is likely to be dismissed as pointless and a waste of band width. In their effort to transmit the ideation content in the body of scholarly electronic mail, discussants expressed views, feelings, provided information and solutions as well as asked questions. These are discussed in the sections that follow.

Expression of views

Expression of views is a term used by Herring (1996) to refer to statements of ideation content evaluated implicitly or explicitly with respect to the speakers' commitment to their

truthfulness. This means that that the discussant can express opinions, beliefs, understanding or judgement associated with some aspect of the topic under discussion. Consider Example (9):

(9) *We know* how important the relationship of children to their parents is (T4)

Example (9) demonstrates a belief or understanding which the author indicates by the inclusive pronoun *we* followed by the verb *know*.

Providing information

By providing information, the discussant is mainly expressing the fact that he is aware of what other researchers have said about the topic under discussion and that other discussants can refer to it. Example (10) illustrates this function:

(10) … his model seems to be described as realistic but the famous note 3 *(Chomsky 1995:380)* puzzles the reader (T16)

According to Example (10) the author's contribution comes out if it is juxtaposed with the views by a previous contributor. For instance, *the famous note 3 puzzling the reader* is the current mailer's contribution which appears to challenge an earlier mailer's view which *describes the model as realistic*.

Expression of feelings

Expression of feelings is usually brought out when authors offer their views on a topic under discussion. According to Herring (1996), expression of feelings is realized through the use of phrases such as "am concerned" and "it angers me". Example (11) illustrates this:

(11) …postponing semantic component to the end of the derivation is *pure nonsense* (T16)

According to Example (11), the mailer feels that it is pure nonsense to postpone semantic component to the end of the derivation.

Suggesting solutions

Discussants provided solutions to challenges facing linguists in their efforts to share linguistic research as illustrated by Example (12):

(12) For descriptive materials, however, it might be a good idea to *create another archive*, along the lines of ROA or LingBuzz (T12)

It is apparent from Example (12) that linguists are faced with the challenge regarding descriptive materials to which the mailer expresses the need for creating another archive along the lines of ROA or Ling Buzz.

Asking rhetorical questions

Rhetorical questions are literary expressions that provoke discussants into deeper engagements with the topic under discussion. According to Crystal (2001), rhetorical questions are more common in electronic mails than in other variables of written English, apart from certain types of literary expressions. One such question drawn from the study data is expressed in Example (13):

(13) *What does that really mean compared with the many different phenomena to be found in the world?* (T4)

This rhetorical question, like all others, does not seek an answer from the virtual community of linguistics but is an avenue for deeper reflection on the subject being discussed. It can be added that the question poses a challenge to the linguists.

(c) Conclusion

The Conclusion in scholarly electronic mail is preceded by the body of the message. Hwang (1998) notes that it is an appeal to other participants to either continue with the discussion or even end it. In addition, Herring (1996) maintains that it is an appeal to other discussants but is not as predictable as the first two moves. In this study, Conclusion in scholarly electronic mail was signalled in the form of rhetorical questions and ideation content as expressed below.

Rhetorical question

The use of rhetorical question as a conclusion by a discussant expresses the need for other discussants to take the conversational floor and post their views on the ongoing discussion. According to Hwang (1998), it is an appeal to other discussants to either continue with the discussion or even end it. Consider Example (14) that follows:

(14) *Doesn't this ignore decades of linguistic research?*

In example (14), the discussant concludes his message by asking a question. The discussant is exiting the floor and making an appeal to others to take their turn. In other words, the mailer is asking other linguists to comment on whether decades of linguistic

research are being ignored. In this case, context suggests that the rhetorical question is information-eliciting. This has been supported by Spago (2016, p. 105) who notes that context remains the ultimate and most salient indicator of whether a question is rhetorical or non-rhetorical.

Herring (1996), observes that appeals are interpersonal in that they invoke other subscribers in their role as addressees and that turn-taking resembles face-to-face conversation in day-to-day speech. Subscribers leave the floor to allow others to comment. This observation reveals that the language of computer mediated communication is distinct and complex in that it exhibits the characteristics of both written and oral speech.

Ideation content

The Conclusion move is also signalled by ideation content where the mailer projects a contribution as an original thought, idea or contribution to the on-going discussion as indicated in Example (15).

(15) *Eloquence is entirely another matter, and there is no doubt that there is too little of it these days (T18)*

The example indicates that discussants can conclude their message by providing a summary of the entire discussion. The mailer gives an opinion that *eloquence* does not seem to exist these days.

General Conclusions

Based on the foregoing discussion, one of the most important conclusions emerging is that the scholarly electronic mail is a genre. This is because it is characterized by discrete parts with each performing different communicative functions and signalled by some typical linguistic exponents. These features, among others, are what constitute a genre according to Swales (1990), Luppicini (2007) and Maroko (2008, 2010).

Secondly, there is evidence of an existing discourse community that is virtual in nature. Developing a virtual discourse community is entirely dependent on the conventionalized communicative events embedded within disciplinary and professional practices. It is evident that the five themes which yielded the scholarly emails for analysis received long threads of contributions from different linguists who undoubtedly form a virtual discourse community.

Thirdly, generic structure in scholarly electronic mail is informed by certain linguistic properties that help a writer create coherence in writing their mail. Linguistic choices have

therefore got to be made by a writer in order to introduce the different macro segments in a cohesive mail. Therefore, members of the discourse community are expected to be familiar with the nature of language that communicates effectively to the rest of the members.

Language used in scholarly electronic mail is not explicitly written. There are scholarly electronic mails that are not free from certain forms and functions of verbal communication because they exhibit elements of day-to-day spoken speech. This presents the thread of discussion on a given theme as adopting a conversational approach blending with written discourse.

Implications for Pedagogy

Given that the scholarly electronic mail is an emerging genre, it is evident that linguists aspiring to join virtual discourse communities are probably not aware of the nature and compositional characteristics of the genre. This paper therefore recommends consciousness raising efforts to linguists on the rhetorical structure of the scholarly electronic mail. Such efforts could take the form of online workshops or tutorials for practising linguists as they will be using the virtual platform at some point in their careers. Fora of this kind can form thematic strands for further online engagements among scholars.

The online workshops or tutorials could adopt the genre approach in which participants display the features of the scholarly electronic mail. These features will include a four-move structure comprising epistolary, introduction, body and conclusion and their corresponding communicative functions. The participants can also share the linguistic exponents that signal, for example, a claim, response to previous contribution, an opinion or an understanding of a topic of interest. As they share features of the scholarly electronic mail, the virtual group could also share their views on the following questions:

(a) What are the discrete parts (moves) of the scholarly electronic mail?

(b) What are the communicative functions of the moves of the scholarly electronic mail?

(c) What are some of the typical linguistic expressions used to signal the communicative functions identified in (b)?

(d) Which audiences are addressed by the scholarly electronic mails?

In the end, the online group can compile the generic features of the scholarly electronic mail and use it to construct posts that meet their intended purposes. In this way, it will be

possible to track progress made in the acquisition of the scholarly electronic mail as an emerging genre and also how it changes over time.

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Appendix

Table 1. *Generic move-communicative function relation*

Generic move	Communicative function
Epistolary convention	Opening and closing a mail
Introduction	Link to an earlier message,
Body	Expression of views
Conclusion	Appeal to other participants