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Electronic Letters to a City Council factors influencing the composition of email messages

by [Ylva Hård af Segerstad](#)

This study is an analysis of electronically transmitted letters (i.e. email messages) and traditional paper letters (i.e. handwritten or typewritten letters on paper) from citizens to the authorities of the city council in Göteborg city. The norms for email are still in the process of being established. People are uncertain how to formulate themselves in this rather new medium. Most studies of email have been made on email messages of one-to-many interaction in public mailing lists. This is a study of public one way, one-to-one email messages, where the receiver is an unknown authority.

The overall purpose of this study is to try to establish which factors influence how people formulate themselves in a textbased electronic medium. Do email messages to authorities conform to the business template of traditional formal letters, or is it the ease and rapidity of the electronic medium that pose the greater influence on the way the senders formulate their messages? Or are there combinations of other factors? Results from this study confirm results from previous studies of email (Herring, 1996, Du Bartell, 1995, Danet, forthcoming), suggesting that email messages to authorities are less formal and shorter than the formal business template. Email often seems to serve other communicative purposes replacing phone calls (Severinson-Eklundh, 1994).

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1. Introduction

We frequently use computer-mediated communication (CMC) today through the written medium via networked computers, both for private and for professional purposes. One of the reasons for using the fast transmitting computers is the convenience it brings. Email has a number of advantages compared to traditional written letters: it is an easy, fast way of getting in touch with people, and it is also low in cost. Transmission time is very much shorter than that of the traditional postal service, and a reply could possibly be received within minutes. It is also possible to attach files of various kinds (e.g. sound files, word processor documents, etc.) to email messages.

As email messages are written, certain demands and constraints are put upon both sender and user. Spoken interaction is multimodal, making use of several channels simultaneously for sending information. Written interaction has to rely on the single and linear channel of vision for communicating textual messages. Strategies, such as the use of smileys or abbreviations (see "This study" below) have been developed to overcome the difficulties of the written medium in order to avoid misunderstandings and ambiguities, and still be able to make use of the speed of transmission that CMC technologies allow for.

It is imaginable that the evolving possibilities of electronic communication change the way people approach each other in writing. What psychological and contextual factors influence the way writers compose their electronically transmitted messages? Studies have shown that the purposes for communication, as well as topic and medium for communication play a part in the way messages are formulated (Baym, 1996; Du Bartell, 1995; Hård af Segerstad, forthcoming¹). Other factors, such as the relation between sender and addressee (Danet, forthcoming), grounding and closure on the actions (Clark, 1996) also have their share. Whichever medium one selects to communicate through, it will have an impact on the potential forms of language which may be manifested (Du Bartell, 1995: 232). The ease of access to sending messages and the user's relative anonymity might also influence the way in which electronic communication is formulated.

Other studies have shown that the faster the medium, the more like spoken language the written messages get (cf. Horowitz and Berkowitz, 1964). Other studies have shown that email messages often get more informal both in terms of composition (salutation and closing conventions) and form (spelling, syntax) (cf. Herring, 1996).

Email messages are rapidly composed and transmitted, and low in cost and effort of production and transmission. They are written rather than spoken and allow the sender to remain relatively anonymous.

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2. Aim

This study aims at analysing what could be the underlying factors behind how people compose their electronic messages (email) that they send to an unknown authority at the city council of the city of Göteborg, Sweden. A comparison with traditional paper letters of the same type will be made. Intuitively, one expects that the relation between sender and addressee will have an influence; letters approaching "authorities" will conform to the formal business template (cf. Danet, forthcoming).

The ease and rapidity of production and transmission is hypothesised in the present study to make email messages more "speech-like" and less formal than traditional letters, which are conforming to the business template (see "The Swedish business letter template and norms for informal letters" below). At the same time, email messages are still written and need to rely more on the typed words than on contextual information, and in this sense email messages tend to be more "written-like". The written mode may also make people feel that they may remain relatively anonymous and stay "hidden" behind the text, as it were. Most email software automatically include the sender's name and email address, which one would expect would lead the sender to omit his or her name in closing the message.

The analysis was made by examining whether the traditional paper letters and the email messages conform to the formal business template with respect to epistolary conventions such as salutation and closing conventions (cf. Danet forthcoming) in combination with an analysis of contextual factors such

CLOSING CONVENTIONS (cf. Baker, forthcoming), in combination with an analysis of contextual factors such as the status of the sender, the medium, the purpose and topic of communication.

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3. Background

Analysis of messages in an electronic Swedish conference system

Extensive work on electronic mail as a medium for dialogue has been made. Severinson-Eklundh (1994) argues that the computer medium may serve communicative purposes previously reserved for direct, spoken conversation. Her analysis of a body of messages from the Swedish conference system COM (1986), showed that messages were structured into coherent dialogues in a way distinct from other forms of written communication. Dialogue sequences appear in email simply as a result of linking between messages and their replies. The exchange of email messages may contain a range of speech-like or "conversational" features. This applies both to the character of individual messages and to the structural features of the entire dialogue. Severinson-Eklundh states that the email messages in her study typically were short compared to regular letters. Furthermore, almost all messages used a direct, informal style of address.

Analyses of messages in electronic mailing lists

Du Bartell's (1995) study of the features of the messages in a mailing list suggests that the spoken and written-like characteristics in a written medium result from the constraints imposed by the computer medium – the machine architecture. The computer medium permits texts which seem both written-like and spoken-like. CMC messages display linguistic characteristics typically associated with spoken language and other forms of written language in addition to linguistic features specific to the medium. Du Bartell argues that we expect written language to be edited, planned, articulated without recourse to non-standard constructions, slang and vulgar expressions. From speech we expect more or less the opposite: we expect slang, the non-standard grammatical constructions, the sudden topic shifts and spontaneity. "CMC gives us these in writing. CMC discourse exhibits the type of grammatical constructions that appear in non-edited non-standard spoken language of face-to-face interaction" (DuBartell, 1995: 233).

Herring (1996) analysed the schematic organisation of electronic messages posted to two academic mailing lists, one mostly male and the other mostly female, in order to evaluate the popularly held view that men and women use email for different purposes (information exchange vs. social interaction). Her results did not support the stereotype, but showed that women's and men's messages are structured differently, with female users exhibiting alignment, and male users opposition, towards their addressees.

The basic electronic message schema was analysed into epistolary convention of salutation, introduction, body, and close. She concludes from analysing 136 messages that "Surprisingly few messages are preceded by a salutation (only 13 % on average), and fewer yet are followed by a complimentary close or a postscript." (Herring, 1996: 87).

Both Herring and Du Bartell explain the relative lack of epistolary conventions to be partly because of the fact that a header is added automatically to each message by the electronic mailer, including a separate line for whom the message is "from", whom it is addressed "to", and the date and time of posting. Partly as a result of having a subject displayed, email messages frequently omit even the typical salutations and farewells associated with other media, regardless of whether or not the speakers² know each other. Email messages do display rather informal register characteristics, even between people unknown to each other (Du Bartell, 1995).

Baym (1996) argues that although CMC is written it is marked by many features associated with face-to-face interaction. Her study of Usenet messages³ showed that Usenet interaction is a hybrid between oral, written, interpersonal, and mass communication. Baym concludes that the message features of her

study stem from five interrelated factors – the Usenet medium, the institutional context of work, the topic, the participants' gender, and the social context which the participants strive to create.

Analysis of private email

Because of the problems of ethic considerations, not many studies analysing private email, rather than public mailing list messages, have been published. For this reason, and for the reason of analysing private, one-to-one email messages, Brenda Danet analyses portions of her own email correspondence (in *Keybo@rd K@perz* [sic] – *artful communication on the Internet*, forthcoming). Her email study focus was on letters sent to her by people who did not know her but knew her name and status. She remarks that

[...] a writer of a first letter is likely to take special care in its formulation. Traditional norms for letter form are likely to be salient, and writers are likely to be especially conscious of the impression their message may make on the recipient.

Danet analysed her email messages holistically, using the criteria of the business letter template. In the case of openings and closings, letters were coded "yes" only if they contained both an appropriate opening and an appropriate closing. Abbreviations, spelling, typography, punctuation, and use of exclamation points conforming to the norm were coded "yes". She found that none of the letters of her corpus conformed to all her criteria, and that the variability was extreme. Most letters conformed to expectations regarding syntax and vocabulary, as well as those for spelling, typography and layout, but almost none followed paper letter practice regarding openings and closings.

Danet argues that the new medium invites informality even in business or official contexts. This is not just due to the technology per se, but converging with a general trend which she takes to have been in place already. She remarks that the novel medium can facilitate changes of style and substance in much shorter time, than would paper letters have done. Style, or register, may apply to substantive domains of human communication and action – not to all communication in a medium (cf. Allwood's activity

based communication analysis [1976, 1995]). Danet concludes that the language of email is in a state of transition. She predicts, among several things, that an informal, partially speech-like email style will increasingly characterise public as well as personal communication. Our normative expectations will change to provide increased legitimation of a more informal style.

Closure on actions

Herbert Clark (1996: 222) argues that a fundamental principle of intentional action is that people look for evidence that they have done what they intended to do. People need closure on their actions. He argues that to get closure on an action, one looks for evidence that one has succeeded. This principle applies to intentional actions of all kinds. Evidence of success must be valid to be useful; it must be reliable and interpretable. Evidence must also be easy to get, economical in effort. Evidence must be timely. Without such evidence, one may try the action again, or try to repair what went wrong. In conversation people ordinarily go to some extent to reach joint closure on their actions. An answer to a question gives evidence that the question is perceived and understood. This applies not only to spoken conversation, but to written communication as well.

This study

The analyses made by Severinson-Eklundh, Du Bartell, Herring and Baym above all concern email dialogue. Email dialogue consists of an ongoing discussion comprising a series of messages which are interconnected: a person sends a message which is met with one or more replies; sends off another message or replies in his or her turn. The mailing list messages are contributions in a many-to-many interaction. However, this study deals only with single one-way messages⁴ from individuals to a remote and unknown "authority". Like Danet's study, the material consists mostly of "first letters" from people who do not know the recipient personally. Unlike Danet's material, the senders did not know the

recipient by name, but possibly only had a notion of the higher status of the authorities at the city council.

Written language in general lacks some of the information cues that are conveyed in spoken language. An utterance conveying words such as, e.g. "It's your fault" may not lead the risk of being taken as an accusation or an insult. The listener takes into consideration more than just what is being said. The speaker's and listener's shared background knowledge, the context in which the words are uttered, non-verbal information picked up from the tone and intensity of voice, facial expressions, gaze, gestures etc. can all add up to an interpretation of the utterance as a jestful remark or sarcasm or the like. The same contribution in nothing but plain text leaves the receiver in so much more doubt as how to interpret the message. Text-only without clarifying comments can be very ambiguous and difficult to decipher.

In a previous study (Hård af Segerstad, forthcoming) dealing with strategies in written language in a chat room, there emerged some distinct strategies for the purpose of overcoming some of the constraints on written language. Strategies such as the use of

- Emoticons, or smileys, in resemblance of facial expressions
- Abbreviations and acronyms
- Words or phrases written in capitals only
- No mixed cases
- Extensive use of punctuation marks
- Fonts and colours
- Asterisk framed words or phrases

are used to enhance the written language, prevent misunderstanding, and reduce the time and effort of production. Some of these are innovations of the written language, and specific for CMC. Others have been used for the same purpose in traditional written language (e.g. abbreviations, punctuation marks), but perhaps to a lesser extent.

According to Horowitz & Berkowitz' study from 1964, part of the many differences found between spoken and written expression are due to the greater ease of speaking one's mind than writing it. Any mode of writing⁵ that increases the ease of production of this mode should result in the production of cognitive and linguistic material closer to that produced in spoken expression (Horowitz & Berkowitz, 1964: 620).

The Swedish business letter template and norms for informal letters

The Swedish business letter template differs slightly from the British-American one as described by Brenda Danet (forthcoming): "Most generally, the standard paper business letter is supposed to be cast in a formal style—to use language appropriate to formal situations". The British-American formal letter opens with a salutation or greeting ("Dear Sirs" or the like), has blank space between the salutation and the body of the message and between the body of the message and the closing. Furthermore, it has to conform to the norms and conventions of spelling, punctuation and orthography (e.g. sentence initial capitalisation, no contractions and no typos).

The Swedish formal business template⁶ opens with the topic or concern of the letter, often underlined or in bold face. It is not the practice to open with a salutation. The sender's address, as well as the receiver's and the date are often placed at the head of the letter. Like the formal British-American business template it has a blank space between the salutation and the body of the message and between the body of the message and the closing. It also has to conform to the norms and conventions of spelling, punctuation and orthography.

On the other hand, informal letters in Sweden, like letters between pen pals, mostly open with a salutation or greeting. The informal "hej" ("hi"), or variants of it ("hejsan", "hallå") are often used. Danet also notes that "In the Anglo-American tradition, personal letters have always been more conversational and informal than business or official ones", which is true also in the Swedish case.

4. Material and method

Material

Email data

The data of this study consists of electronic mail from citizens to the city council of Göteborg, Sweden. The messages are public material, open to anyone who wishes to take part of the city council material. The material consists of 183 messages sent between April 1, 1998 and August 31, 1998. The web page of the city council provides a "Questions & Answers" service, at which anyone has the possibility to send messages of any sort concerning issues that they hope the people at the city council might be able to help them with. Originally, the service was designed for questions and remarks concerning the web page itself, but people sent messages of all kinds, and it was eventually decided that this service should pose no restrictions on what kind of messages to handle.

People were asked to fill in a form with the following fields: "Sender" (email return address in order to get an answer back), "Subject/ topic" (subject of the message), and lastly the field "Text" in which the message was composed. After filling in the form and writing the message, the message was sent by clicking a "send" button at the bottom of the page⁷. The form looks basically like most email software, but the return address is not automatically added.

Traditionally written paper letters

Data from 25 traditionally written paper letters was also analysed: 4 were handwritten, 17 used a computer, and 4 were typewritten. The letters were of the same kind as the email messages: open⁸ letters from citizens asking questions, requesting help, or the like. The comparatively low number of traditional letters is due to the problems that the staff at the city council archive had with abstracting material out of their filing system. A further study will have to include an analysis of a larger number of traditionally written letters, which would be more suitably comparable to the email corpus.

Method

Both the traditional letters and the email material were collected from the city council with the help of the staff at the information and archives departments⁹. It was stored, and analysed digitally using an automated tool – TRASA – which was developed by Leif Grönqvist at the Department of Linguistics, Göteborg University, Sweden. For this study we used this software for quantitative analyses of the occurrence of abbreviations and punctuation marks, closing and introductory words in messages, mean length of utterance, etc.

The main focus of analysis was qualitative. Qualitative analyses of both email messages and traditional letters aimed at rating them for whether or not they conformed to the business letter template (cf. Danet, forthcoming). Focus was on salutations, pre-closings, closings, and signatures. In order to try to establish factors influencing how people compose their messages, cross analyses was made of the gender of the sender, the status of the message (sent for private or for professional purposes), type of communication (e.g. question, complaint, etc.), and topic of the messages.

5. Results

Overview of the corpora

Gender

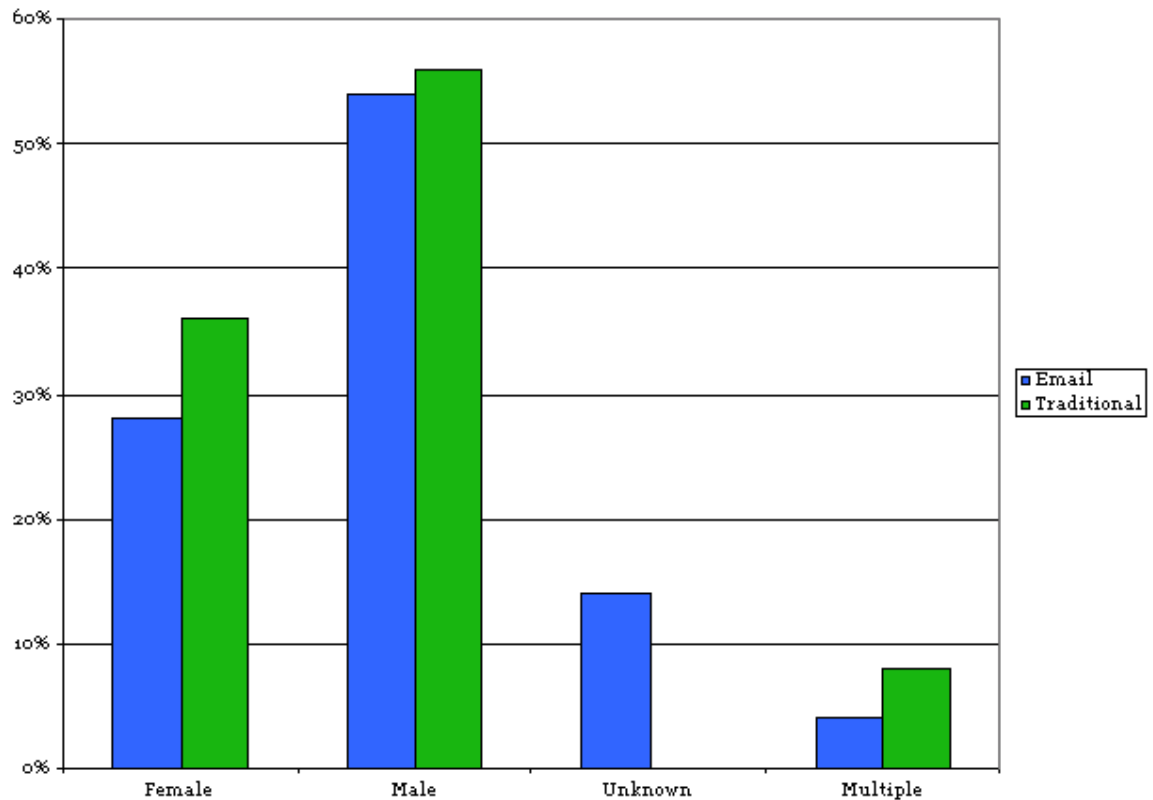


Figure 1: The distribution of messages sent by females, males, unknown, and multiple senders in the email and paper letter corpora (percentage of total).

An overview of who sent the messages shows that most of the messages in both corpora were sent by men. When a message contained no clues as to gender, it was classified as being sent by an "Unknown sender". The sender's email address often contains clues, but many addresses were of the cryptic type, made up by a combination of letters and numbers. Such cryptic senders who did not sign their messages with their name had to be classified as "Unknown senders". Some messages may have been sent by someone using someone else's email account, a fact which one could bear in mind but which will have to be ignored as it could not possibly be discovered. A number of messages were sent by more than one sender – a family or two people working together, for instance – and thus classified as "Multiple senders". Note that none of the paper letters was categorised as being sent by an unknown sender.

Type of message

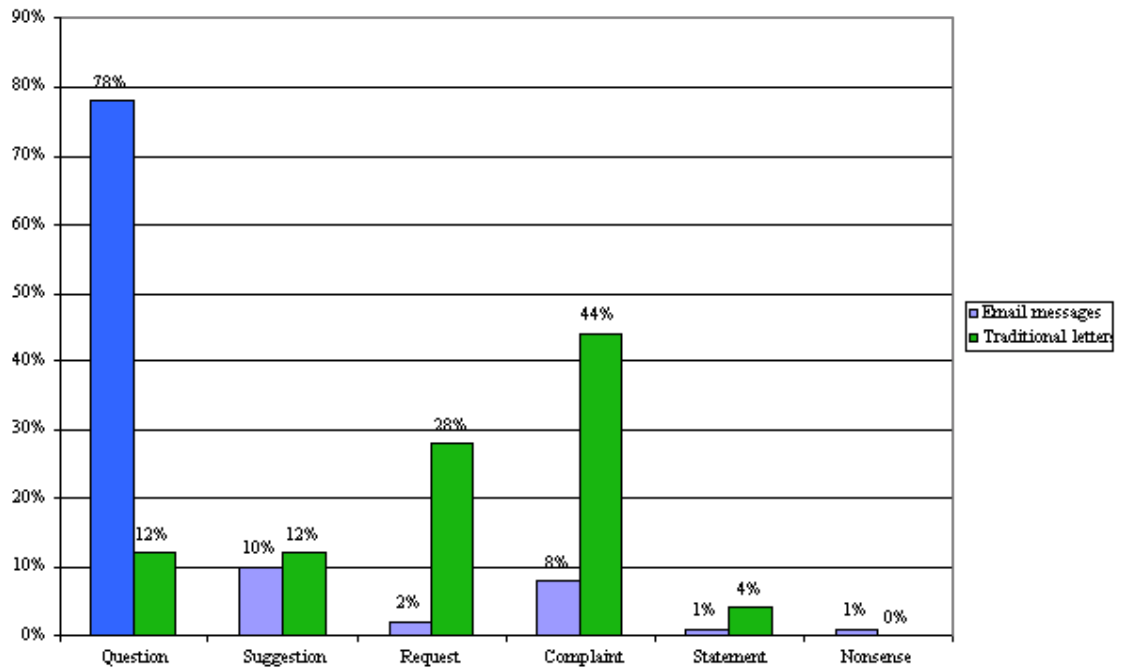
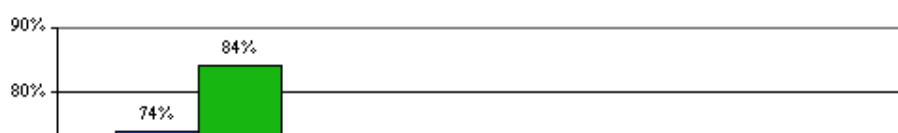


Figure 2: Distribution of type of message in email and paper letter corpora (percentage of total).

The main type of the email messages consisted of questions (78%). The main type of the traditional paper letters consisted of complaints (44%), and requests or appeals for help (28%). Most of the messages were questions or requests for information of various sorts. Other messages were remarks or complaints; the largest category of the paper letters was complaints. In email cases complaints were mostly about the failing information at the web site. Several messages were complaints about matters in the city: opening hours of the museums or parking facilities, for instance. A number of messages contained offers of services or suggestions: people offered to work or to send information that could be useful at the web page or for the people at the city council, some suggested co-operation. Many of the messages contained both a question and a remark of some kind, but were classified as that which seemed to be the primary cause for communication.

Reasons for communication



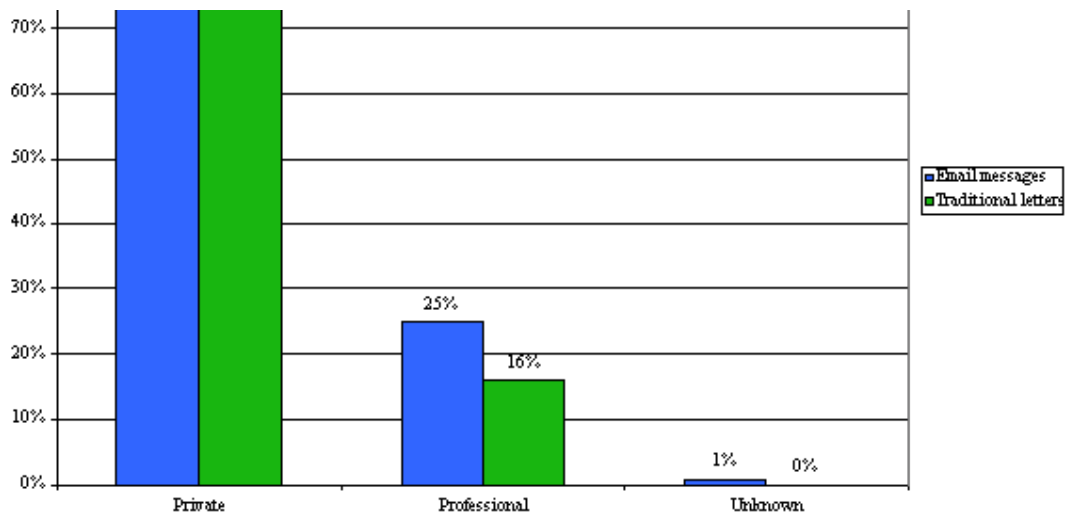


Figure 3: Email messages and paper letters sent for private or professional reasons (percentage of total).

Most of the messages were clearly sent for private reasons: citizens of Göteborg or someone seeking information of various kinds. 74% of the email data, and 84% of the paper letter material were sent for private reasons. 25 % of the email messages, and 16% of the paper letters were sent for professional, or business related reasons. This was concluded from topic, signature and sender's address. The better part of the messages, though, was sent for private purposes.

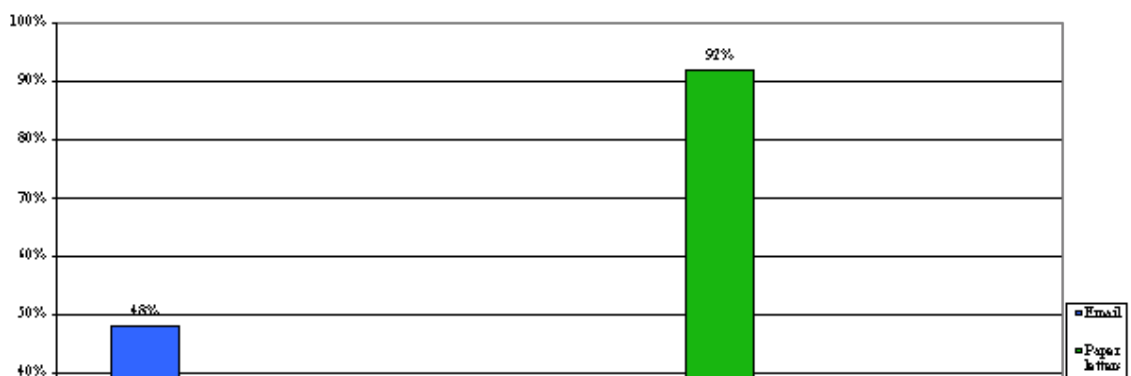
Analysis of the letters

My analysis of the letters is influenced by Brenda Danet's. She categorised her email into groups conforming in various degrees to the business template with regards to salutation and closing conventions. Her smaller corpus allowed for a more scrutinising analysis of each message, but I was forced, for limitations of time and space, to exclude a closer analysis of each letter in this study with respect to spelling, punctuation, and occurrence of informal syntax.

The email messages as well as the paper letters of this study were analysed for salutation conventions and whether or not the messages were signed with the sender's name. The Swedish business letter template does not require salutation, but a topic or the letter's concern, of which the subject line of the email format is taken to be the equivalent. Four categories emerged:

1. Messages introduced with a salutation and signed with the sender's name (+salutation/+signature).
2. Messages introduced with a salutation, but not signed with the sender's name (+salutation/-signature)
3. Messages left without salutation, but signed with the sender's name (-salutation/+signature).
4. Messages neither introduced with a salutation nor signed with the sender's name (-salutation/-signature).

Salutations and signatures



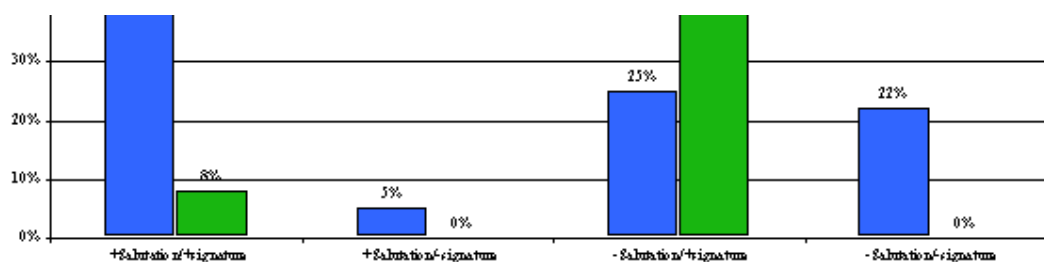


Figure 4: Diagram visualising the distribution of email and paper letters into categories of salutation and signature (percentage of email and paper letter corpora respectively).

Category 1

+Salutation/+Signature

As seen in fig. 4, the category +salutation/+signature occupied 48% of the total number of email messages, and 8% of the total number of paper letters. This category of the email messages (+salutation/+signature) covered 48% of all questions, 50% of all suggestions, and 35% of all complaints. The only two instances of smileys occurred in this category which conforms to the norms with respect to salutations and signature. Both messages were informal in spelling and syntax. Smileys did not occur at all in the paper letters.

Category 2

+Salutation/-Signature

The second category, +salutation/-signature, consisted of 5% of the email material and had no representations in the paper letter data. Only 5% of all email messages were opened with a salutation and not signed at all. The two types of the email messages (+salutation/-signature) were questions and complaints. This group featured 6% of all questions, 7% of all complaints.

Category 3

-Salutation/+Signature

The third category, -salutation/+signature, occupied 25% of all email messages and 92% of the total number of paper letters. 25% of the email messages had no salutation, but were closed with a signature. This category conforms the most to the traditional Swedish business letter template, if we allow for the subject line to serve as the subject opener of paper letters.

In this category, in the email material we find 22% of all questions, 27% of all suggestions, 50% of all requests, and 42% of all complaints.

Category 4

-Salutation/-signature

The last group, -salutation/-signature, consisted of 22% of the total number of email messages and was not represented at all in the paper letter data. These messages conformed the least to the business letter template, in having no salutation and no signature. Only four of them had a pre-closing of some sort. This group is the most "email like", and it is also in this category that we find the most unknown senders (11% of all unknown senders). This fact is probably due to the email format which normally give name and address of the sender automatically, but wich the web form does not provide (cf. Herring, 1996). In this category we find 23% of all questions, 22% of all suggestions, 14% of all complaints, and the only clear example of a nonsense message (see Conclusions).

Conclusions from the categories

As we saw from the diagram above, the email messages are spread out over the four categories, whereas the paper letters only figure in two categories. In this sample, the email style is more varied. Moreover, it seems that the email messages and the paper letters almost show opposite features.

None of the traditional letters were categorised into -salutation/- signature or + salutation/- signature. All traditional letters but two, were the most consistent with the Swedish business template: not preceded by a salutation but ended with a signature. The same category of email messages consisted of 25% of the email messages. The largest category of the email messages, 48%, were opened with a salutation and closed with a signature, but only 8% of the traditional letters in this small sample were in this category.

These results do confirm the results of previous studies of email in a way which may seem contradictory at first glance: Herring's findings from the mailing lists suggested that surprisingly few messages were preceded by a salutation (Herring, 1996) - only 13% on average, where we find 48%. This is a somewhat contradictory fact if we take the business template to be the form to refer to, as the British-American formal letter requires a salutation and the Swedish one does not. This suggests that the email messages of this study are less formal than the business template, which is quite in line with the results from previous studies.

5% of the email messages were preceded by a salutation but not signed with the sender's name – this category scored 0 in the traditional paper letter corpus.

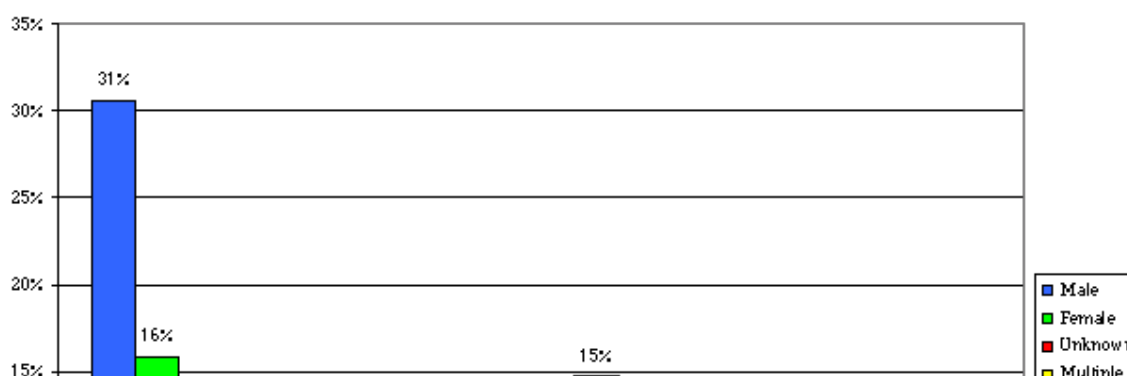
The most "email like" messages, the ones with neither salutation nor signature, would perhaps be expected to be more frequent had the messages been posted in an ordinary email programme for private use. The messages in this study were composed and posted in an electronic form at a web page and the sender's name was not automatically added. Even so, 22% of all email messages were of this type. This category had no equivalent in the paper letter corpus.

The last category described above only appears in the email corpus and does not appear at all in the paper letter data. These facts confirm the argument that the normal email architecture and the information automatically given ("From", date and time of posting) make this unnecessary to type. In paper letters, on the other hand, it is necessary to include name and address manually if the receiver is to know who the sender is.

Previous studies have suggested that email messages are shorter than paper letters (c.f. Severinson-Eklundh, 1994). This study clearly confirms this fact: the mean length of the email messages was 52,78 words, and that of the paper letters was 412,56 words.

Salutation/signature and gender

Below follows a cross analysis of salutation/occurrence of signature and gender of the senders. This combination was chosen mainly to investigate whether or not there are differences between the email and letter writing conventions of men and women. Other combinations of parameters are of course possible, but will have to be left for further studies.



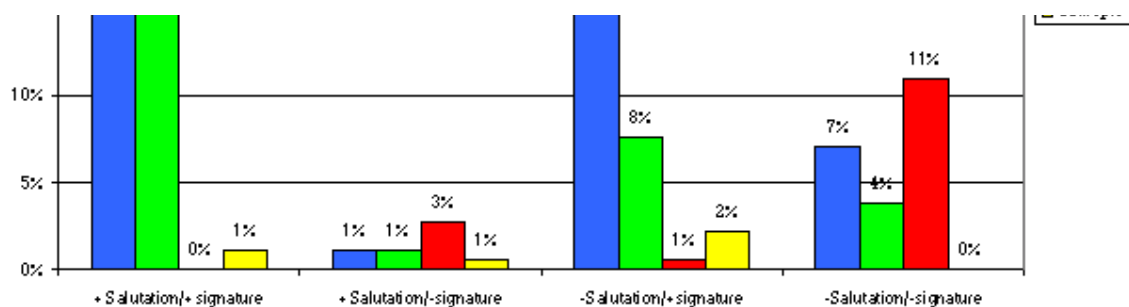


Figure 5: Percentage of the total number of messages distributed into four categories of email style.

Fig. 5 shows the distribution of the gender of the senders of email messages over the four categories. Men seem to keep to the informal paper letter conventions of category 1 slightly more than women do, but this is at the same time also the category which was most represented by both male and female senders. We can draw no clear conclusions of differences of gender in email style with respect to salutation and signature conventions. Category 4, the most "email like" group of messages, had a high representation of unknown senders. This is also the case with category 2, which was the least represented of the four. It could be argued that this is due to the anonymising effect of the email medium: it is possible to hide behind the text, as it were, or behind a cryptic email address that gives nothing away.

Salutation conventions

The messages were analysed for different ways of salutation. Of the email messages, 98 opened with some sort of salutation, and 86 were sent without salutation. All salutations were of the informal kind (variations of e.g. "Hej" ["Hello" or "Hi"]) followed by variants of conforming to the norms for punctuation: exclamation mark, comma, full stop or no punctuation at all. I agree with Herring and Du Bartell (see "Background" above) that this is a common characteristic most probably stemming from the fact that both topic and sender is announced in the header of each message.

Of the traditional paper letters, only two opened with a salutation: one with the informal "Hej!" ("Hi!"), while the second one, written in English for professional reasons, was introduced with "Dear Sirs", and conformed to the business letter template in all aspects.

Closing conventions

44% of the email messages had closing phrases of some sort. 3% were closed with the signature only, and 17% were sent with neither closing nor signature.

The use of abbreviations in closing was common. 19% of the email messages were closed with some variant of abbreviating the normative, formal closing phrase (cf. Stenson) "Med vänliga hälsningar" (literally "With friendly regards"). The abbreviated phrase showed a wide range of variations: examples are m.v.h., MVH, mvh, M.V.H., and so on. None of them is the correct way of signing a formal letter. 23% of the email messages were closed with variants of the formal "Med vänliga hälsningar". Examples are "vänligen" ("in a friendly manner"), "Vänlig hälsning" ("Friendly regards"), and so on.

40% of the traditional paper letters were closed with the full formal "Med vänliga hälsningar". None of them was closed with the abbreviated form. 24% were only signed with the sender's name. 8% closed with the date and sender's name. 28% closed with some pre-closing ("Tack på förhand" ["Thanks in advance"] or the like) in combination with the sender's name.

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6. Conclusions

The aim in this paper was to analyse electronically transmitted written messages from citizens to the city council of Göteborg, Sweden, and thus try to establish what psychological and contextual factors influence people's way of composing messages in electronic communication to unknown authorities. It was hypothesised that factors such as the purposes for communication, topic and medium for communication play a part in the way messages are formulated. Other factors such as the relation between sender and addressee, grounding and closure on the actions, the ease of access for sending messages, and the user's relative anonymity might also influence the way in which electronic communication is formulated.

The results seem to confirm suggestions from previous studies that the norms for email are still in the process of being established. People are feeling uncertain as to what conventions to use and what the effects of their messages will be. People are juggling with both written and spoken conventions when formulating their electronic messages. Are email messages to be like speech formulated after telephone behaviour (without visual and vocal cues) or after the written norms of traditional letters? The style of the messages in this study cover the range from formal, letter-like messages, to informal messages with all the features to be expected of email messages. They are clearly shorter than traditional paper letters, supporting evidence from Severinson-Eklundh (1994).

Just about 48 % of all the messages in this analysis kept to the traditional way of writing informal letters and were introduced with some sort of salutation and concluded with some kind of closing convention. Only 5 % of the messages were introduced with a salutation of some sort and concluded with no closing convention at all. 25 % of the messages were not introduced with any kind of salutation convention but concluded with closing conventions of some sort. 22 % of the messages were neither introduced with a salutation nor concluded with any kind of closing convention.

Herring (1996) and Du Bartell (1995) explain the relative lack of epistolary conventions found in the messages of their analyses, to be in part accountable to the architecture of email programs. Email technology in itself is easily accessible, and the typing of messages and the transmission time is rapid. Sending an email is also low in both cost and effort. E-mail and the increased accessibility seems to make people less scared of having their say in writing, and the quick and easy way of sending email messages may influence the way people write, and what they write about. Email is still in the written mode, and allows the sender to remain relatively anonymous, while at the same time having to struggle with the monomodality of written language.

Danet's suggestion of a more socio-/psycholinguistic kind, is that the relation between the sender and the receiver is a factor that might influence how people compose their messages. First letters to an authority should conform to the formal norm of letter writing. This is perhaps not so well confirmed in this study, and might in part be due to cultural differences in letter writing. The senders' age was not possible to find out in this study, and gender was in some cases difficult to establish too. Still, I believe that the sender's age and gender most probably affect the writing style.

The closure time (Clark, 1996) of an email is uncertain. The sender does not in advance know whether s/he will get an answer to his or her mail, nor is it clear whether the message was sent or not.

The choice of style may not always be apparent to the writer. One of the reasons for choosing a particular style seems to be the purpose of the communication. If the purpose is to obtain help or information, there is a tendency to mind one's language and send "correct" messages. If the purpose is to complain or remark, there seems to be a tendency towards lesser politeness and lesser formality displayed by the lack of salutations or closing conventions.

Anecdotal evidence from the staff at the city council suggests that email often replaces telephone calls. They also suggested that the types of messages they get through email are of a different sort than traditional paper letters. It seems that people feel they can hide behind the text and also behind screens, and remain relatively anonymous. The ease and rapidity of sending an email make people send messages which they probably would not have bothered to send had they been forced to find pen, paper, envelope, stamps, letter box, and so on and so forth. Besides, when people sent the email

messages of this particular study, they were already on-line and surfing the Net. Below is an example which I believe illustrates this beautifully, and which I cannot bear to withhold from the reader. I dare guess that it would never have been sent in a traditional paper letter:

Från: Stocckholmarn

Ämne: Hata lantisar

Text:

Ni götborgare är jävla lantisar. Ni kan sluta va så jävla kaxiga. Ni är en liten skitstad mot Stockholm.

Älska Stockholm

From: the Stocckholmer

Subject: Hate country bumpkins

You gothenburgers are real country bumpkins.

Stop being so damn cocky. You are a hole compared to Stockholm.

Love Stockholm

This could be seen as evidence that the accessibility and least-possible-effort it takes to contact someone in writing produces messages of a different type than that of which traditional letters normally are.

Further studies

Time and space limit the scope of this analysis, and leave many questions unanswered or not analysed in as much detail as a fuller study would provide. It is my intention that further studies will address some of these issues in a more satisfactory manner.

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About the Author

Ylva Hård af Segerstad is a PhD student at the Department of Linguistics at Göteborg University in Sweden. She is currently working on her thesis which deals with the adaptation of Swedish written language to different kinds of electronic communication, including studies of email, chat, avatar chats, and web awareness tools.

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URL: <http://www.ling.gu.se/~ylva/>

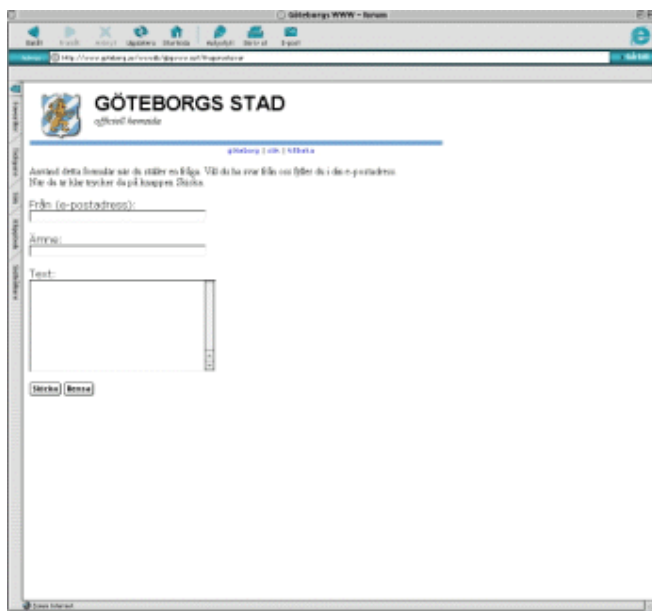
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Notes

1. Hård af Segerstad, Ylva. Forthcoming. "Swedish Teenagers' Written Conversation in Electronic Chat Environments". In: Penrod, Diane (ed.). *WebTalk - writing as conversation*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. ([Back to the text](#))

2. Du Bartell employs the terms 'speaker' and 'listener' regardless of the medium of linguistic communication. ([Back to the text](#))

3. Usenet is an enormous collection of topically organised discussion groups distributed through the Internet. ([Back to the text](#))
4. On inquiring, I was informed that all messages were in fact eventually answered, but that material was sadly enough not given for analysis and thus not included in this study. ([Back to the text](#))
5. Horowitz & Berkowitz compared handwriting, typewriting and stenotyping in 1964. ([Back to the text](#))
6. Stenson's *Skriva i Tjänsten* ("Professional Writing") (1997) was consulted for the norms of the traditional business template. ([Back to the text](#))
7. The web page form can be found at <<http://www.goteborg.se/wwwdb/gbgwww.nsf/fragorochsvar>> (5 August, 2000). ([Back to the text](#))



8. "Open" in this sense means that the letters were addressed to anyone at the city council, and not to someone in particular. ([Back to the text](#))
9. My warmest thanks to the friendly and helpful staff at the city council, Göteborg, Sweden: Udo Metz, Lotta Sundström, and Annette Johannesson. ([Back to the text](#))

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