

# THE STRUCTURE OF PERSONAL E-MAIL MESSAGES

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A number of different approaches have been taken toward the study of texts and to determining what constitutes a coherent text. One of the attempts to provide a theoretical account to determine the fundamental properties of texts is the approach put forward by Halliday & Hasan (1988). In their description of the most outstanding characteristics of text structure, they introduce the notion of contextual configuration to play a central role in the structural unity of the text. In the present study, Halliday & Hasan's notion of Contextual Configuration is applied to the structure of private and personal e-mail messages in order to determine a "generic structure potential" of this genre.

## 1. Introduction

Halliday & Hasan (1988) define text as "language that is functional", "that is doing some job in some context of situation". A contextual configuration (henceforth CC) is a specific set of values that realises *field*, *tenor*, and *mode* and its features are used for making predictions about text structure in terms of (a) what elements must occur; (b) what elements can occur; (c) where they must occur; (d) where they can occur; and (e) how often they can occur (Halliday & Hasan 1988, 56). An element is defined as "a stage with some consequence in the progression of a text" (Halliday & Hasan 1988, 56).

## 2. Data

The data for this study consist of a corpus of 20 e-mail messages, including both newly initiated ones and replies, which deal with personal topics. All the messages analysed are embedded in the CC summarised in table 2.1.

Table 2.1: The contextual configuration of the messages analysed.

<p><i>Field</i>: Personal message to a friend; communication and request of personal information. <i>Tenor</i>: Agents of transaction: non-hierarchical: sender are receiver are friends; social distance: minimal. <i>Mode</i>: Language mode: constitutive; channel: graphic; medium: spoken.</p>
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## 3. Halliday & Hasan's (1988) approach applied to personal e-mail messages

Computer mail, or e-mail as it is commonly known, is one of the modalities of communication which, together with computer messages, fora and documents, have been coined by Murray (1988) as Computer-mediated communication (CmC). In particular, according to Murray, e-mail refers to "extended text which is sent and received via the computer" (...).

E-mail messages have two very distinct parts: (a) the heading and (b) the actual contents of the message. Because of the unique way e-mail messages are transmitted, some information is required by the computers for the message to be successfully delivered. This information is included in the heading and some of it is compulsory, without which the message will not be sent, while the rest is optional. The necessary information is the date and time the message is sent and the mail address of the sender, which are automatically provided by the computer once the mail programme is accessed, and the addressee's mail address, which has to be introduced by the sender. The optional information is the subject of the message and any attachments that the sender may like to send. The first part of e-mail messages cannot be considered *text*, though, in Halliday and Hasan's terms. It is just a succession of information that is needed for the computers to send and receive messages. So, in this study we are going to be concerned with part (b), the actual contents of e-mail messages, and the only part that can be considered *text*.

### 3.1. *Obligatory and optional elements*

McC is a recent phenomenon and so there are few established conventions as to what messages sent by means of a computer should consist of. Moreover, e-mail messages appear to be a hybrid of both oral and written language. Although the channel used to transmit e-mail messages is the written one, the spoken medium tends to be used in them, and this is more so in personal messages to friends. That is, in e-mail messages we write *as if* we were speaking. This is evident from the use of capital letters to mark emphasis, the repetition of vowels and the use of "..." to indicate intonation, and other conventions which may vary from user to user but which all aim at representing spoken language in a written channel.

As has already been mentioned, Halliday and Hasan distinguish between the obligatory and the optional elements that make up a text's structure. Obligatory elements are said to "define the genre to which a text belongs; and the appearance of all of these

elements in a specific order corresponds to our perception of whether the text is complete or incomplete" (1988, 62). An optional element, on the other hand, can occur but is not obliged to occur and "the conditions under which there is a high probability of its occurrence can be stated" (1988, 62). The fact that allows us to distinguish between obligatory and optional elements is that our perception of the kind of social activity we are involved in does not change. Taking these definitions into account, the only obligatory element in an e-mail message for it to be considered as belonging to the genre of personal e-mail messages as defined before is the fact that it provides some new personal information about the sender or asks the receiver for some information.

E-mail messages can be a reply or a new message. The fact that the message is a reply does not change our perception of the social activity involved being anything different from a personal e-mail message. The context is just seen as simply a variant of the same CC. The optionality of some elements arises from the fact that their occurrence is predicted by some attribute of the CC that is non-defining for the CC and to the text type embedded in the CC.

### 3.2. *The structure of two sample messages*

In order to determine the structure of the contents of personal e-mail messages, I will analyse two sample messages, a newly initiated message and a reply (see Appendix), into their obligatory and optional components.

#### 3.2.1 *Message 1*

Leaving the heading apart, for we have already argued it is not text, message 1 begins with a *greeting* (G). This is the first optional element. Although it appears in most e-mail messages and in different forms, two of the messages analysed, though, do not include one and they are still perceived as e-mail messages fulfilling the CC aforementioned. So, according to the definition of

optional elements stated above, G must be an optional element. The fact that greetings are so common in the messages analysed and the form they take are due to the minimal social distance between the participants. Greetings indicate a "continuity of personal relation" (Halliday & Hasan 1988, 63) and in these messages it is clear that the people involved know each other very well.

The next element is what constitutes the *new information* that the sender wants to convey (NI). This element occurs three more times in message 1, so NI is an iterative element and it constitutes the core of message 1. If none of the other elements were present, at least NI should be. It is an obligatory element.

This makes *request for information* (RI) another optional element. RI normally occurs at the end of the message, when the sender has already introduced all the NI and asks the receiver a question. However, as message 1 shows, it can also occur after a particular piece of NI if the sender wants to ask the receiver something related to that NI that she has introduced.

Another optional element in message 2 is *finis* (F). This element is said by Halliday & Hasan to have a high probability of occurrence when the social distance between the participants moves towards the minimal end of the scale. The function of this element is that of expressing the desire to renew contact with the addressee. Most of the messages include some form of F. Finally, the message ends with the sender's name or *signature* (S). This is an optional element as well, as we know from the heading of the message who is writing to us. Again, all but two messages include it.

### 3.2.2 Message 2

As message 2 is a reply to a previously received message, the element following G is a *reference to this previous message* (RPM). This, again, is an optional element because it need not be present, for example in new messages, or even in replies, as an answer or a comment can be given to a previous message without mentioning it. The following two

elements, *comment on previous message* (CPM) and *reply to previous message* (RePM), are also motivated by the fact that the message is a reply and they do not occur in new messages. Only if there has been a previous message can we comment on it or give a reply to a question. However, in a message such as 2, which is a reply, RePM could constitute the core of the message without the need for any other elements to occur in it.

The next element is an iterative one: NI. As in message 1, three pieces of NI are given. However, while in message 1 each piece elaborated on the previous one, in message 2 each piece of NI is independent from the others. It may look like there is no connection between paragraphs 2-4, all of which introduce NI. However, as Halliday & Hasan postulate, "the property of texture is related to the listener's perception of coherence". E-mail messages have an internal coherence that cannot be considered only taking into account a message in isolation. As Stubbs (1983) points out, the meaning of a text depends on at least three things: the language of the text itself, who produced it and who is responding to it. Although some meanings are created by the words themselves, some meanings depend on our knowledge of the point of view of the author. Even in messages that are not replies to a previous specific message, there are references to events and facts that had been communicated previously and so a message that may look like a sequence of sentences to somebody not familiar with the information being referred to will make perfect sense to the person receiving it. This is precisely the case of message 2. Only to the receiver of the message, who has previously been in touch with the sender by e-mail, perceives the message as a coherent one, that is coherent with the previous information that both sender and receiver share. When NI is introduced, the sender can ask the receiver's opinion or comments on it. This is done, as in message 2, in *question on new information* (QNI). Later on, when the receiver answers this message, her answer to QNI will become RePM.

Finally, message 2 also has the optional elements F and S. A further optional element which does not occur in either of the messages analysed is PS. PS occurs after S in 4 of the sample messages.

#### 4. Discussion

Taken messages 1 and 2 as representative of the corpus of 20 e-mail messages, we can represent the generic structure of private and personal messages having the CC depicted on table 4.1:

Table 4.1: *Generic structure for private and personal e-mail messages.*

$[(G^{\wedge})]$	$[NI^{\frown}/RePM^{\frown} \bullet (CPM^{\frown}) \bullet (RPM^{\frown}) \bullet (CNI^{\frown}) \bullet (QNI^{\frown})]$	$[(F^{\wedge})]$	$[(S^{\wedge})]$	$[(PS^{\wedge})]$
(a)	(b)	(c)		

Following Halliday & Hasan's representational conventions, the round brackets indicate optionality of enclosed elements. So, G, CPM, RPM, CNI, QNI, F, S, and PS are optional. In fact, only NI and RePM are obligatory. Here we introduce a new symbol: / means that either one or the other necessarily has to occur, although both can occur together. In the case of reply messages, RePM is more likely to occur together with NI, although RPM on its own would be enough for the message to be complete. In new messages, however, only NI will occur. The dot • between elements indicates more than one option in sequence. Thus, within the body of the text (b), all the optional elements and NI can occur in whatever order. The square brackets indicate the elements within them have to occur in that position regarding previous and following square brackets. Thus, G has to precede NI, while F has to follow NI and precede S; likewise, if PS occurs at all it has to be at the very end of the message.  $\frown$  indicates iteration.

Halliday & Hasan's analysis of text structure in terms of obligatory and optional elements works very well for contexts that are very well defined, as that of service encounters which they use to illustrate their theory. In such a context the participants bear very specific roles, that of seeker and that of supplier of goods and/or services, and no matter what the goods or services are there will always be a request for them on the part of the buyer and a sale compliance on the part of the seller. In the context of personal e-mail messages to convey and request personal information, there is not such a clearly defined structure. Some elements which

are the core of one particular message may be missing in the next. In fact, we have seen that the only obligatory elements are NI and RePM and still it is only obligatory that one or the other occur, they do not need to co-occur. If none of the possible optional elements is present, we will still perceive a message that only contains NI as text fulfilling the CC specified in section 2, and this is because of the nature of e-mail messages, which are a quick way of transmitting information, be it a single line or three screens long.

We could rather say that the structure of the personal e-mail messages analysed is made of three main parts: (a) greeting, (b) body of message, and (c) finis. Both greeting and finis are optional because the fact that they are not present does not make the message incomplete just because of the interaction between text and context that Halliday and Hasan postulate. Text and context are so intimately related in e-mail messages that the fact that the information is sent by a computer, which makes it a fast means of communication, allows for the avoidance of some formalities that would be obligatory in other kinds of communication of personal information between friends, such as letters. As far as the body is concerned, it is the only obligatory component of the message, but it can consist of different elements, only one of which must obligatorily be present but all of which can co-occur as already graphically described in table 4.

## Works cited

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- MURRAY, D. "The context of oral and written language: a framework for mode and medium switching." *Language in Society* 17 (1988): 351-373.
- STUBBS, Michael. *Discourse Analysis: The Sociolinguistic Analysis of Natural Language*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983.

## Appendix

## Message 1

## (a) HEADING

Date: Tue, 22 Sep 1998 09:10:57 EDT  
 From: DR@aol.com  
 To: MPP@rdg.ac.uk>  
 Subject: Huraah!!

## (b) MESSAGE

G	Dear M,
NI	Sorry to have been so uncommunicative but I think doing this dissertation has made me lose all my social skills!! If I ever had any in the first place!!!
NI	But fortunately, I have finished it and handed it in!! huraah!!! It was very bad!!! VERY BAD!! I think I could have done with another 3 months to write it properly, but it is handed in so that's the end of that!!! I popped in with it yesterday, sorry I didn't phone but I had to rush back to Bristol!!
NI	Well the summer's over!! Goodness!!! Where has it all gone? I hope that you had a great summer!!! I'm sure you are looking all tanned and beautiful as ever!!
RI	Are you looking forward to the new term? I'm sure that it will be fun!!
NI	I've got a new job starting next week for a computer company! I'm not quite sure what I am going to be doing but it is in Bristol and it starts next week god!! So that is that then!!! I got some teaching at the University of Bristol over the last month, but they can't offer me anything through the term, well only a couple of hours a week, so I guess it it's not meant to be at the moment!!
RI	Anyway, MP, How is all with you? How is S? Did you and R, and the others manage a girly week in Spain? If you did I'm very jealous!!!
RePM	Is R going to do the PhD? How is yours going all good fun with YH?
F	I shall write more soon guapa, take care of yourself!! And I'll speak to you soon!! Muchos abrazos and besos, L :-)
S	

MESSAGE 2

(A) HEADING

Date: Sun, 1 Nov 1998 05:10:38 EST  
 From: DR@aol.com  
 To: MPP@rdg.ac.uk  
 Subject: Re: Masters Marks

(b) MESSAGE

G	M
RPM	Thank you so much for letting me know about the marks - hurrahhh!!!
RI	How did everyone else do? How are you? And how is R- miss GAP ? Does she get a discount on the clothes? If so I shall send her a list tell her!!!
NI	My job is getting better now- rather I'm much busier, I got paid and I have made some friends at work. We all went out on Thursday for a meal and then to a nightclub. It was great fun - of course I got very drunk and danced the night away and even better it was all free! Not bad eh. The nicest thing is that at the end of the day I come home and I have nothing to do to do with work. Not sure I'll be doing it forever but it's a job for now.
RePM	D is fine but working as hard as ever last week he had 3 presentations (1 hour each) to do as well as working a 60 hour week. It is beyond me how he does it all! Oh well he does!!
NI	<b>My mum and K and A came to stay last w/e for a few days. It was great to see them and go out sightseeing and stuff. I'm getting quite good at my tour guiding thing now- so when are you coming?!!!</b>
NI	We are going to Ireland for the week on Nov 14th. I know that we are completely mad to go to Ireland in November but it should be interesting and good to get away. I've never been and I am looking forward to drinking proper Guinness and going on a pilgrimage to the home of Boyzone.....mumum might have to rethink the latter!!!
F	Anyway guapa, give my love to all the girlies- and best wishes. If I don't see you before will you be around on graduation w/e? Maybe we can all get together on the Friday night (Dec 11th). Ya, guapa, que te vaya muy bien
S	Besos L