Courtesy Quotient in Interpersonal Communication: A Comparative Study on Traditional Letters Vs Computer Mediated Communication

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Abstract:

Results from a comparative study of traditional letters and letters through computer mediated communication (CMC) viz. SMSes, emails etc., show that interpersonal communication through CMC, though moves faster amongst the communicants, lacks courtesy in addressing the receiver, in signing off his written content, in treating the communication as interpersonal rather than group communication and also in treating the communication as a source of information rather than a communication having interpersonal character. On the other hand, traditional letters meticulously took care in maintaining courtesy while addressing the recipient, in the whole contents of their letter as well as while signing off the letter .

Introduction

Interpersonal communication is the process that we use to communicate our ideas, thoughts, and feelings to another person. Our interpersonal communication skills are learned behaviours that can be improved through knowledge, practice, feedback, and reflection.

Interpersonal communication includes message sending and message reception between two or more individuals. This can include all aspects of communication such as listening, persuading, asserting, nonverbal communication, and more. A primary concept of interpersonal communication looks at communicative acts when there are few individuals involved unlike areas of communication such as group interaction, where there may be a large number of individuals involved in a communicative act.

According to Beebe, Beebe,& Redmond, 2002 (1) "Interpersonal communication is a distinctive form of human communication that… is defined not just by the number of people who communicate, but also by the quality of the communication. Interpersonal communication occurs not when you simply interact with someone, but when you treat the other as a unique human being"

Similarly, according to Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, (2007) (2), interpersonal communication refers to the exchange of messages, verbal and non-verbal, between people, regardless of the relationship they share… Thus, interpersonal communication includes the exchange of messages in all sorts of relationships, ranging from functional to casual to intimate. These definitions all represent interpersonal communication as involving some form of mutual activity, interaction, or exchange, but they also differ significantly.

Interpersonal communication is not a single process but rather is composed of several interrelated processes that need to be carefully coordinated. These processes include message production, message processing, interaction coordination, and social perception. Besides Interpersonal

communication never occurs in the abstract but always in a specific, concrete situation. It is also a social process. There are two or more beings that are mutually oriented towards each other in the unfolding situation. As a species of social interaction, communication necessarily involves mutual influence and joint action.

The message centred perspective, as proposed by Brant R Burleson defines 'interpersonal communication as a complex social process in which participants establish a communicative relationship, exchange message in an effort to generate shared meaning and to achieve social goals. (3)'

This perspective speaks about several aspects like (i) communicative relationships, (ii) shared meaning of exchanged messages, (iii) Complex process and (iv) social goals. This implies the necessary condition for establishing interpersonal communication, there must be communicative relationship between the interactants i.e. both have similar of same area of reference to encode and decode the intended message and reciprocate. This in turn is possible when the message or feedback has got the shared meaning to be deciphered by the participants in the process.

This also holds true, although with some modification for communication through letters. In this case the source may assume that his intention will be recognised and accepted by the recipient and the recipient may well recognise the intended intention of the source and act accordingly but may not signal his interpretations. Communication between parties separated by time and space is possible because the participants are intimately familiar with the nature of the communication in shared time and space and thus can make necessary accommodations to adjust for temporal or spatial separation. (4)

Interpersonal communication, as per this perspective, is also a complex process. Complex, because, the message has to be encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver. Unless the message is encoded keeping the social perspective in mind and feedback is given with the same set of social consideration, it conveys nothing. According to Burleson, 'people do not produce or interpret message as ends in themselves; rather they engage in these activities to accomplish particular social goals.' British sociologist Basil Bernstein studied the way class membership is related to language usage. He found that working-class language employs shorter, simpler and more conventionalised grammatical forms (restricted codes), while middle-class syntax exhibits more variety and complexity (elaborated codes).

While elaborated codes are used primarily to convey information, restricted code users , on the other hand emphasises the social aspects of language, using it as a tool for building social identity and binding the individual to the group (5).

The heralding of ICT era, has given birth to new forms of interpersonal & mass communication which is being termed as Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC). CMC could include dyadic communication viz., real time chatting such as instant messaging, group chat systems including conferencing, emails, social networking sites like facebook, tweeter etc..

Ulla Bunz and Scott Campbell's (2004) research on 'Politeness Accommodation in Electronic Mail' as cited by Trenholm, S. & Jensen, A. (2008) had the objective to see whether convergence could take place in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). The language variable they choose to examine was politeness. The research showed that although certain social cues may be filtered out by e-mail technology, "politeness indicators are communicated, interpreted and reciprocated," allowing communicators to build positive impressions online.

The central theme of this research was to study the syntax in the Computer-Mediated-

Communication and the courtesy component in it as compared to the letters written by people in earlier times.

According to dictionary.com (6), courtesy means *excellence of manners or social conduct; polite behaviour or a courteous, respectful, or considerate act or* expression. On the other hand, merriam-webster dictionary (g) defines courtesy as polite behavior that shows respect for other people or something that you do because it is polite, kind, etc or something that you say to be polite especially when you meet someone.

On analysing several CMC communications, namely e-mails cell-phones and instant messaging, it was found that almost all these communications had started with an address 'Hi' or 'Hello'. Then the sender *more often than not* moves directly to the issue for which, he/she has written that mail or called over the cell like asking couple of questions on business or study or relationship matters. It was also found that most of the interacants use acronyms or a new set of words that have developed in the era of fast communication like Del for Delhi, Mum for Mumbai, Pop for father, gal for girl, univ. for University, Bro for Brother and Sis for Sister, Lapy for Laptop, etc.. While Americanised accent has taken precedence over the British accent in most of the e-mail, SMSes and instant messaging communications, communicants also use Roman scripts to write Hindi or their mother tongue for conveying their messages. Besides, a new '*lingua franca*" has already been development by the CMC communicants. It has the basis objective to communicate the message or feeling, irrespective of the rigour of sentence formation or phonetics in word formation for example an instant messaging by a girl to her friend read: "*I m in hry. going tutn. met u at Gardn at 6. Will go to ccd. (Cafe Coffee Day)*"

Given the fact that these electronic communication automatically registers the date and time and can be accessed from any parts of the world, none of these communications carry any date or time especially put by the communicants nor there was any mention as where the emails or instant messaging were sent from. This implies that, the recipient may not know at all from where the email or the instant message has been originated unless the sender implicitly put the name of the place in her communication for some reasons.

A customary look at the CMC communications may looks small in size, but actually, these small packets of communications-which could be termed as interpersonal- happens frequently, and in some cases, the interacants spends a lot of time sending messages to each other.

Or another e-mail sent by an engineering student to his father read:

Hi Papa

How r u? How is mum? I am fine.

We are going for a study tour to B'lore for a week. The fee is Rs.5000. please deposit the money in my account asap.

Bye.

While analysing this message, it came to the mind that, the sender of this e-mail did not put any date or place in his communication. This issue has already been discussed above. Secondly, the writing is full of shot forms, abbreviations and new computer accents like 'u' for 'you', 'r' for 'are', 'mum' for 'mom or mother' and 'asap' for as soon as possible'.

The student also did not follow the customary Indian way of wishing her father. Instead, she preferred the new but now highly popular and frequently used term 'Hi' to wish. Then in the next line she enquired

about the wellness of her parents while informing them about her fineness. The approach looks very casual. She then moved straight to the issue and informed her father that she was going for a study tour and needed money and asked him to deposit the money in her bank account at the earliest. With the objective communicated, she completed her letter by putting a bye at the end. There was no wishing, nor any courtesy in signing out the letter.

An e-mail communication by two young friends also reflected the issues that have already been discussed above like the e-mail started with a 'Hi' and then the sender went straight to enquiring about the issues like the party that he had missed, about his friend's girl friend, about his examination preparations etc.. Once he completed his enquiries, he did not write anything about himself or his health or his family. In fact he abruptly ended his letter by putting a bye.

In some cases, though the CMC communication (emails and SMSes) happened between two persons at first instant, it was discovered that the communication was later shared amongst several people. An email communication by a student to his friend was forwarded by the recipient to some twenty others. Given the fact that the email send by the person discussed about had some personalised contents, forwarding the matter to a wider audience, has affected the personalised nature of the communication. As we are discussing here the interpersonal communication and courtesy quotient in it, forwarding of a personal communication to others had definitely fall under the category of un-courteous.

An analytical look at traditional letters gave a different outlook.

A letter by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to Chhaganlal Gandhi (7) -son for his cousin and in-charge of the Gujarati section of Indian Opinion and printing press at Phoenix in South Africa- in June 1907 had the place of origin of the letter (Johannesburg) and date (June 12, 1907) at the of the top of the right side. Given the fact the recipient was like a son to the sender, he started the letter with 'My dear Chhaganlal'. In the next line the sender went on to discuss the issues faced by them and then went philosophical explaining success and how difficulties spur further action and activities. At the end of the philosophical discourse he advised the recipient to keep his eye on the work and not on the results. Then, he tended several instructions to Chhaganlal on the publication of Indian Opinion. Later he discussed some family issues with him and at the end signed out with a humble 'your sincerely' and at the end he put his name by writing M.K.G.

Another letter by Vithalbhai Patel to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (i) in May 1926 had the same pattern of writing i.e. the place of origin of the letter (Bombay now Mumbai) and date (May 10, 1926) at the top of the right side. As M.K. Gandhi was affectionately called as Mahatma Gandhi by all, Vithalbhai, a freedom fighter and a close ally of Gandhi, addressed him as 'Dear MahatmaJi'. Then he went on to discuss the resolution he had made while accepting the office of President of Legislative Assembly. After explaining the issues, and his failure to honour the resolution, he made it clear that he was ready to abide by the resolution from the month of writing the letter and entrusted the recipient to deal with the money the way he want to spend.

At the penultimate sentence, the sender though mentioned that he has some idea as how the money should be spent and expressed his willingness to discuss them with the recipient but again made it clear that the final decision should be of the recipient.

At the end, he mentioned that he was attaching a cheque with the letter and hoped that the recipient would not decline to take the responsibility. He signed out with 'I am,' with the next line starts with 'your sincerely' and ended with his name V.J.Patel.

Upon comparing the communications happened through CMC and traditional medium, it was found that, the CMC communication, though fast, lacks the basic courtesy at the beginning as well as at the end in addressing and wishing the recipient. Though the interacants shared basic information in this mode, the communication lacked personal (humane) touch. As a result, the CMC communication, more often than not, appeared like a mechanical process than inter-personal communication process. Besides, with the technological advancement, the CMC communication, even if it was interpersonal in nature, can be shared amongst a wide number of people at a click of the mouse. As a result, the nature and character of the communication was changed.

On the basis of this, it could be concluded that the present day CMC communication though has got the speed, lacks courtesy, politeness and above all the interpersonal character as compared to the letters in traditional medium.

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