

A STUDY OF FEATURES OF INDONESIAN BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE E-MAILS

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Abstract Artikel ini mendiskusikan ciri-ciri surat menyurat bisnis e-mail yang dilakukan oleh perusahaan telekomunikasi swasta. Yang dikaji adalah ciri-ciri bahasanya dan formatnya. Data terdiri 200 e-mail perusahaan dan rekan bisnisnya dalam komunikasi rutin. Selain itu dikaji juga kesamaan dan perbedaannya dengan surat bisnis yang konvensional. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa adanya kesamaan format antara surat bisnis e-mail dengan surat bisnis konvensional, yaitu dalam Kepala Surat, Tanggal, Alamat di dalam surat, Hal, Badan surat. Perbedaan nampak dalam item-item Tembusan, Kepentingan, Salam, Salam Penutup, dan tanda tangan. Item-item tersebut tidak selalu ada dalam e-mail, yaitu tergantung pada kebutuhan, tipe dan konteks e-mail ditulis meskipun item-item tersebut penting dan seharusnya ada dalam surat bisnis konvensional. Format surat bisnis e-mail lebih fleksibel dan dari segi bahasa bersifat lebih informal.

Kata kunci: e-mail, e-mail business correspondence, feature

Introduction

Discourse analysis, or discourse studies, is a general term for a number of approaches to analyze language in use which is traditionally divided into two major categories, the spoken and the written language, based on a difference in production and reception (Goody, 1977:78, cited in Brown: 1984:13; Biber, Conrad & Leech: Chapter 13, cited in <http://kampela.it.helsinki.fi>),

Spoken and written language are distinguished on a number of features, including dynamics of information transfer (writing being a fairly static form of transfer of information and relatively formal in style, speaking being a dynamic more informal), precision (writing is more precise due to possibility of preparation, review and revision, while speaking is more direct), and effectiveness (speaking is more effective due to the extensive repertoire of signals available to the speaker: gestures, intonation, inflection, volume, pitch, pauses, movement, visual cues such as appearance, and a whole host of other ways to communicate meaning) (Brown: 1984:14). However, there are intermediate cases which have features between writing and speech such as spoken language which is read or learnt from a script (like *news bulletins* and *plays*) or based on written notes (like *talks* and *lectures*) (Cook, 1990:115), and more recently, with the information technology development, electronic discourse, or *E-discourse* (including homepages, IRC, facebook, etc). This paper focuses on e-mail. Email has been the most familiar, widely used in various purposes and influential form of contemporary communication exchange. It has replaced conventional business correspondence letter, particularly due to its unique feature such as speed, at which messages are sent and received, which promotes efficiency in time, cost, simplicity, global network and good business strategy (Carroll et al., 1997: 108–9, cited in Muniandy, 2002).

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Emails in general are distinguished from conventional business letters in some points including form (being softcopy instead of hardcopy), medium (internet technology instead of manual delivery), rule and type of language in use (tendency to use less formal or mix between formal and informal language). Some elements of emails are also automatically standardized such as slots for sender and receiver's name and electronic address (*From, Sent, To*) and some are even automatically provided by the e-mail system such as sender's email address and sent date.

There have been studies on e-mail in business correspondence (Zhang, 2006 and Muniandy, 2002), both of which study commercial e-mails in English in China and Malaysia, respectively with emphasis on the process of e-mail as a new discourse type (Muniandy) and the text and the stylistic features of commercial e-mails (Zhang). This study investigates e-mail as business correspondence in Indonesian language. It attempts to investigate (1) the differences between e-mail and conventional business letters with regards to the rule of conventional business letter writing based collected data, and (2) the language features of e-mail business letters.

Review of Related Literature

A number of studies have discussed both spoken and written discourse (such as Brown, 1984; Cook, 1990) as well as e-discourse (Muniandy, 2002; Ng Yong Kiang, 2003). Generally written language is distinguished in a number of features such as purpose (transactional vs. interactional), permanence (writing being permanent, while speaking is transitory), lack of monitoring and access to immediate feedback, lack of face-to-face interaction and paralinguistic features, the last point being limited by typography such as punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, italicization (Brown, 1984). On the other hand, spoken language is less richly organized or typically much less structured of syntax and less densely packed information (Cook, 1990:50). Intermediate cases, i.e. texts showing both written and spoken language features such as news bulletins, plays, lecture talks and lectures shows that this division is not clear-cut (Cook, 1990:115). Technology has made possible for the mixture.

The development of internet technology expands global communication and creates what is known as 'global village', regardless the distance, nationality or familiarity of each other. Internet use promotes 'computer-mediated communication' (CMC) which enables people to communicate with other people by means of computers and networks (Romiszowski and Mason, www.aect.org/edtech/ed1/pdf/14.pdf), in such system as computer conferencing, electronic mail, discussion lists, and bulletin boards. CMC is in fact a combination of the two major modes of communication (Shortis, 2001, cited in Posteguillo, 2003:127).

Electronic discourse or e-discourse is "a bridge" to accommodate the ideas of conventional concept of discourse and as a form of intermediate discourse, it is "neither here nor there, neither pure writing nor pure speech but somewhere in between..." (Foertsch, 1995:304, cited in Muniandy, 2002:49). However, Muniandy argues that e-discourse is a new discourse hybrid for two reasons. First, following Bhatia (1995), it has the ability to "create, innovate and develop new generic forms to achieve novel communicative goals within the framework of socially accepted generic boundaries."

Secondly, the medium of information are electronic systems, as the messages are conveyed electronically.

Another approach is Netspeak which is defined as “a type of language displaying features that are unique to the Internet, [. . .] arising out of its character as a medium which is electronic, global, and interactive” (Crystal 2001:18). Netspeak is divided into sub-varieties that are related to different communication modes. For instance, the language of e-mails comprises functionally distinct elements that are central for the identification of e-mail as a linguistic variety, such as headers, signatures, greetings and responsive quotations, as well as more local points of stylistic significance’, for instance, spelling variation (Crystal, 2001: 94, 122, cited in Androutsopoulos, *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 10/4, 2006: 419–438). Netspeak, however, is criticized for it lacks features of the socially situated discourses in which these features are embedded (Herring, 1996, cited in Androutsopoulos, 2006:420). Nevertheless, CMC research involves three main issues. First, a wealth of descriptive accounts of its ‘unique features’ (Crystal) such as emoticons and acronyms, the hybrid combination of written and spoken features, and principal differences between synchronous and asynchronous modes; second, the interplay of technological, social, and contextual factors in the shaping of computer-mediated language practices; and third, the role of linguistic variability in the formation of social interaction and social identities on the Internet (Androutsopoulos, 2006:420).

On the other hand, business letters forms have long been standardized in textbooks (ex. in English by King and Cree, 1962; O’Gorman, 1991 for English and in Indonesian by Soedjito and Solchan TW, 2004). The layout or parts of the letters are basically similar. The main parts of English business letters include: the heading (containing information about the sender’s institution, i.e. company’s name, address, phone and fax numbers, business types, telex code and VAT (Value Added Tax) number), reference (internal controlling number for filing system or database for easy tracking), date, inside address (receiver’s name and address), salutation, complimentary close and signature. The Indonesian business letters contain almost similar elements, namely (in Indonesian): kepala (heading), nama tempat dan tanggal (date and place of writing), nomor (similar in purpose with reference), alamat (inside address), salam pembuka (salutation), salam penutup (complimentary close). Other elements that are different from the English letters are: lampiran (indicating attachment), hal/perihal (subject of the letter), isi surat (content, consisting of three parts, opening, content and closing), and tembusan (similar to cc.).

Studies on e-mail business letters have been focused on e-mails as a form of e-discourse (Muniandy, 2002) and text features of e-mails (Zhang, 2006). Muniandy argues e-discourse as a new hybrid with specific features in the content, form or structure, context of situation, and language used, while Zhang studied 36 e-mail messages in a Chinese company written in English, from their text features that comprise of subjects, openings, closings, stylistic register, conversational features, compression, abbreviation, word omission and topic reference, and found that the stylistic and linguistic conventions for e-mail messages seem stable and consistent with the type of business English used between cooperating colleagues.

Research Method

This study uses descriptive qualitative method, focusing on describing and identifying the language type in e-mail writing and to describe the differences between e-mail and conventional business letter related to the rule of business letter writing. The data are 200 e-mails from daily business correspondence at workplace at PT. Excelcomindo Pratama in October 2008. In sorting and selecting the data, cautions are taken to e-mails that are sensitive and confidential for public expose and company. Thus identities and address may be deleted or put in pseudonyms whenever necessary. The data were marked for spoken and written feature, intermediate features and differences from conventional business letter.

Result and Discussion

1. Elements of Conventional and E-mail letters

Analysis on the features of English and Indonesian business correspondence in conventional business letters may be presented in the following list.

No	in English	in Indonesian
1	Heading	Kepala
2	Date	Nama tempat dan tanggal
3	Reference	Nomor
4	Inside Address	Alamat
5	Salutation	Salam pembuka
6	Complimentary Close	Salam penutup
7	Signature	-
8	-	<i>Lampiran</i>
9	-	<i>Hal/Perihal</i>
10	-	<i>Isi surat</i>
11	-	<i>Tembusan</i>

The above list shows some features which exist in English but do not exist in Indonesian counterpart and vice versa. The features marked in italic do not exist in English but exist in the e-mail data. However, the missing features possibly exist in English conventional business letter, either optionally or as minor parts. One exception is the Body or “Isi Surat”, that exists in every type of letters. In the other words, this feature is considered automatically available. While others features are just optional such as Enclosure, that whenever it occurs, this fact is indicated both in the text itself and by the word *Enclosure* (often reduced to *Enc.* Or *Encl.*) typed against the left-hand margin some distance below the signature” (King and Cree, 1991:7).

The analysis of features of 200 e-mails in terms of frequency of occurrence of each feature is presented in Table 1 below:

Variable	Frequency and Percentage of			
	occurrence		absence	
Heading	200	100%	0	0%

Date	200	100%	0	0%	
Inside Address	199	99.5%	1	1%	
Carbon copy	155	78%	45	22.5%	
Subject	200	100%	0	0%	
Importance	16	8%	184	92%	
Body	200	100%	0	0%	
Salutation	151		49		
Complimentary Close	1A	104		37	
	1M	68			
Signature	1A	116	58%	70	35%
	1M	14	7%		

Table 1

Legend:

1A : data exists automatically

1M : data exists manually

The Salutation and Complimentary Close are marked with shaded cell to show repeated occurrence, either created automatically or manually, and thus, it would not be accurate to give the percentages.

Heading: heading commonly consists of the company’s name, address, brand, telephone and fax number, etc. It is always typed on top of paper and that is where it gets its name as heading. In the e-mail, there is a number of common information, which are formatted automatically by system and always placed on the top section like heading. This information includes:

1. From : containing the e-mail address of the sender
2. Sent : containing the date and time when e-mail is sent
3. To : containing the e-mail address of the recipient
4. Cc (Carbon Copy) : containing the e-mail address of the other persons who relate to the sent e-mail and it is just optional/if needed.
5. Subject : the topic or title of the e-mail messages

From (The Sender’s E-mail Address): “From” is equal to “Kepala” in Indonesian business letter, and the sender's e-mail address in English, which is considered as a part of Heading based on its position and function.

Date: Date is similar to Heading in the conventional business letter. This element is obligatory in both standard conventional business letter, either in English or Indonesian, and in most of digital program or system. In e-mail “Date” is not just an automatic facilitation with hour, minute and second of the sent message, but also a

standard item, available automatically every time e-mail is composed, and functions as data validation and organization that both of sender and recipient cannot manipulate it.

Inside Address: the inside address contains the recipient's name, position, address with the company's name. In the e-mail address, which includes the item of "To" containing those who are considered as primary recipients, and also including those who are listed in either "Cc (Carbon Copy)" or "Bcc (Blind Carbon Copy)". Therefore, the sender should be careful in writing the recipient's e-mail address even though the e-mail network system will usually give feedback information when the sender's e-mail cannot reach the recipient's e-mail address. Bcc does not appear at the recipients to keep hidden from the recipients of who else are also invited.

CC (Carbon Copy): this element is a kind of Inside Address, which sends duplicate messages to secondary recipients. Its function is to inform other parties related to the matter discussed whether they want to give any comments or approval, and to let those listed in "To" known by others listed in "Cc" so that they should take a prompt response or give a valid answer.

Subject: this feature is an optional feature, not as automatic as "Date", so there is a possibility to miss typing the Subject. In the work place contexts, the Subject functions to attract the recipients about important news, confidential information, urgent case, to guide the recipients in responding, collecting and compiling data or reports, to inform or update the latest news or status, to focus on point or matter discussion. Subjects may show such other remarks as "FW:" or "RE:" which stands for Forward and Reply respectively, to indicate that the incoming message is forwarded or replied by the sender.

Optional Features (Importance): some optional features of e-mail include: attachment, importance, follow-up, to indicate the importance level of the e-mail.

Body: it contains the point to inform or share to others by the sender.

Salutation: Unlike the conventional business letters, this feature may not always be found in e-mail.

Complimentary Close: this feature may not always be found in e-mails. Common expressions in English include: Best Regards, BR, Many Thanks, Regards, etc, and in Indonesian include: Salam (regard), Terima kasih (thanks), Terima kasih atas bantuan dan kerjasamanya (thank for your help and cooperation), Terima kasih atas perhatian dan kerjasamanya (thank for your attention and cooperation). Due to the possibility of customized signature, some data show manual and customized Complimentary Close.

Signature: Signature in e-mail is distinctly different from the one in the conventional business letter, even though its function is similar as an unique or even legal identity of the sender, particularly his/her name. However, Signature in e-mail has further function to provide further information about the sender title, position, phone or cellular number, company address, as well as to quote proverb even jokes or brief personal expressive statement, which is made possible by the ability of the e-mail software to customize their own unique Signature.

2. Stylistic Features of E-mail Discourse

The stylistic register of e-mail discourse includes syntactic simplification, abbreviations, ellipsis, paralinguistic cues, level of formality, and the use of technical terms.

Syntactic Simplification: this is the process of reducing the grammatical complexity of a text, while retaining its information content and meaning. The aim is to make text easier to comprehend for human readers or process by programs. While in relation to its use in e-mail is to make a simple and straightforward message as context already exists and helps the participants to understand, even also to lower the formality level. However its use, as shown in the data is few compared to the use of ellipsis.

(1) Data 163

Line	Text
1	From: Galih Satriotomo
3	To: Achmad Krisnaputra; Edward Alizar; Abdur Rahman; Ridwan Harianja
4	Cc: Tatang Mulyana; Dwi Handoko; Diah Aisya Ardhiani
5	Subject: RE: Status
6	Kalau untuk kelistrikan, maksudnya adalah:
7	- Di site itu, ada PLN nya nggak, kira-kira seperti ini:
8	o Site tsb sudah ada PLN-nya
9	o Lagi diusahain, ada deadline penyambungan
10	o Ada PLN di sekitar site,tapi susah dapat sambungan J
11	o Tidak ada sambungan, kemungkinan buesar pake genset

In Data 163, besides syntactic simplification, there are also the use of abbreviation such as “tsb” and vernacular. Those are used to lower the formal level, get simple and straightforward sentence like in face-to-face conversation in such a sentence as “*Kalau untuk kelistrikan, maksudnya adalah:*”. For common people who are not part of his recipients would be rather confused with such the words, but the sender is confident his words are understood by his recipients considering the context. However, if it is rewritten in standard grammar, the sentence would be: “*Status dan kondisi sambungan PLN di setiap site dapat disesuaikan berdasarkan pilihan penjelasan berikut: (a) Sambungan PLN ada, (b) Sambungan PLN tidak ada sehingga kemungkinan besar akan menggunakan genset, (c) Sambungan PLN sedang diusahakan maksimal sampai dengan tanggal... and (d) Jaringan PLN ada namun susah untuk mendapatkan sambungan.*” The consequence of using complete grammar is that the sentence becomes much longer and that it tends to be easily understood even by others who are even not listed as recipients or participants.

Abbreviation: Abbreviations are used for two reasons: commoner of the word(s) and economy of expression. The latter may be related to the space and speed in writing which is an important consideration in the digital or internet era, including composing mail. However, user should beware of abbreviation usage that it may cause misunderstanding of the messages by the recipient. As most of the data is in Indonesian, the abbreviations are also in Indonesian and most of them are not

common abbreviation, except for the technical term. Here, the abbreviations refer to common word usually used in daily conversation such as “trims” for “terima kasih (thank you)”, “dgn” for “dengan (with/and)”, krn for karena (because), etc. However, there are also a few abbreviations in English, which are actually common abbreviations in internet communication, including PIC (person in charge), ext (phone extension), fya (for your attention), Fyi (for your information), pls (please), btw (by the way), cmiw (correct me if I’m wrong), “thx” (thanks), “Rgds” (regards) and “BR” (Best Regards). E-mail users tend to feel relaxed in writing and give less attention to standard Indonesian grammar and spelling. It is interesting to note that the use of Fyi and Fya are so common and often in the e-mail business correspondence that they are almost treated as common “words” particularly in working place.

Ellipsis: Ellipsis is defined as alike with the definition taken from an online dictionary that it is “process or result of omitting some part of a word or sentence” (<http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org>). The words or parts of words missing are often said to be “understood” or necessary to make the construction grammatically complete. And this definition is appropriate in relation to findings in the data. It is similar with the use of abbreviation that this ellipsis is also for speed and economical reason. And as the ellipsis uses short words or sentences, the result is that the comments emerge spontaneously like in a face-to-face communication or even a daily conversation. There are some markers of ellipsis (<http://www.wikipedia.com>, the free online encyclopedia) such as a row of three dots (...) or asterisks (* * *) indicating an intentional omission, or also a rhetorical figure of speech, the omission of a word or words required by strict grammatical rules but not by sense. The missing words are implied by the context.

Paralinguistic Cues: Paralinguistic cues are nonverbal elements that modify the meaning of verbal communication such as intonation, body posture, gestures, and facial expression (<http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com>). Many forms of the cues including emoticons or smiley like “☺”, multiple vowels to represent intonation contours like “soooo”, multiple punctuation marks like “what????”, capitalization to show anger or annoyed like “Don’t DO That!” even explicit statement like <wink> are used to show as if the sender and recipients are involved in spoken discourse or face-to-face communication.

Level of Formality: The nature of the language used in emails indicates a feature of spontaneity that is normally seen in speeches, rather than in the informational writing such as official documents. Therefore, we can get a sense of why e-mail is frequently perceived as being more like speech than like writing. Like in the common speech, language used in e-mail also tends to be informal. Even though in commercial or business email, informal tone is still used which are usually shown in such features as loose grammar, subject ellipsis, colloquial, abbreviations and acronyms. On the other hand, the language is mostly simple and straightforward. In relation to the language used, the interesting point in the data is the use of code switching as one of the ways to change the formality level, which, according to Holmes (2001) is due to such reasons as an expression of solidarity, identity and relationship among participants, a change of relationship status and formality level.

The data show that most of the change is due to affection or solidarity, as illustrated below.

(2) Data 24

Line	Text
1	From: Bambang Soejatmiko
3	To: FOC West; FOC Central Region; FOC East; FOC - Construction Management; FOC Jabodetabek; Network Coordinator; Busol - Project
4	Cc: FOCM West; FOCM Jabodetabek; FOCM Central; FOCME East; Noviyus Kurniawan; Handoko Siputro; Librita Arifiani; Galih Satriotomo; FOP Manager; Stephen Sariwating; Meidy Novita; Manager - NPD; GM NPD; Julien CLERET
5	Subject: Monitoring Open Reservation
6	Dear All,
7	We are going to run automatic MRP in our SAP System and one of the requirements for this system is having a "VALID reservation", therefore FOC/User should be responsible and accountable for the accuracy of any open reservation.
20	This requirement is for reservation With ZY15 for project under site plan or EWO on schedule and ZY15 date less than 3 months with condition all material requirement is available in the warehouse, if ZY15 is more than 3 months, FOC require to reschedule.
21	We will provide you the list of open reservation (defined by area) for further action as determine in point 1 - 6 above.
22	I would like to seek your cooperation. Should you have any further concern, please do not hesitate to send me email.

In Data 24, the sender/Bambang Soejatmiko uses full English language in his messages. His purpose in using English language is to bring the recipients, most of them are of superior level, into formal situation as the message delivered is a kind of introduction or socialization of a new process or rule which is related to cross departments to be implemented. Therefore, he hopes his message could be treated as serious as well as urgent matter to be followed up. The data show that usually users switch their language in order to change the atmosphere into formal situation or bring the participants into solemn communication. By changing the code, the user hopes to get quick and valid response even reliable data.

Technical Terms: There are some common abbreviations as well as technical terms in English language frequently used in the data. Most of them are related to purchasing or commercial term and civil construction or telecommunication for the rest. However, the use of these terms shows that English language more become absorbed even familiar with most of Indonesian people. Probably there is replacement term in the Indonesian language but due to unfamiliar or even not properly, so it is used rarely. Some technical terms found in the data include: GR (good received), GI (good issued), (IR (invoice received), Dp (down payment), CME (civil mechanical electrical), BTS (base transceiver station), and MW (microwave).

Conclusion

Nowadays the use of e-mail in daily communication becomes the dominant medium, particularly in the workplaces as correspondence tool replacing the old conventional business letter. Obviously, it has more benefits compared to the old conventional in terms of saving time and cost, having more features and flexibility, et cetera. On the contrary, in the conventional business letter, the sender should consider time also cost due to manual delivery besides the others limitation compared to e-mail i.e not flexible in distributing carbon copies, documentation, document search, et cetera.

As there are many advantages of e-mail, so it is not surprising when e-mail tends to be a common preference of many people as well as organization then. In relation to the organization, included one of them is company, the writer tries to have further investigation and examination of the differences between e-mail and conventional business letters with regards to the rule of business letter writing and what features are found in e-mail business letters.

Based on the findings, basically some features of e-mail are another personification form of some features in the conventional business letter such as Heading in the conventional business letter is personified or represented by From, To, and Subject besides the other optional fields i.e Cc / Bcc, Date, Attachment, etc. Considering their existence, always listed and positioned in the top of the email, and main points, giving basic, early information i.e the sender, recipient address, and matter discussed, both of them are alike. Therefore, based on data result that Heading, Date, Inside Address and Subject respectively represent From, Date, To and Subject overallly get 100% or mean always available like in the rule of business letter writing. While the rest, except body of course, has vary result as they are optional field or feature so depend on the user either use it or not. In fact, the variation becomes the interesting result of the findings where it is found that in relation to the style of e-mail, the use of some standard fields such as Salutation, Complimentary Close and Signature can be ignored or not used either consciously or unconsciously. Moreover, it is found in the some data that the use of them is more than once.

While dealing with the features in e-mail business letters, it is found that ellipsis, abbreviations, code switching, the use of technical term and level of formality often exist then following with the use of paralinguistic cues and syntactic simplification. In general, the most result of using those features tends to create both of informal language and circumstances also direct even casual communication as if in the face-to-face communication. It is obviously different with the conventional business letter as more formal and typical standard written language.

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