

Chapter 27

The Need for Identity Construction in Computer– Mediated Professional Communication: A Community of Practice Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the construction of personal identities by individuals of the same rank through the discourse they constructed while engaging in computer-mediated professional communication in the workplace. First, it discusses the need for the members of three different communities of practice to construct desirable personal identities via their daily computer-mediated professional communication. Second, it discusses how the members constructed these identities through the e-mail discourse they composed by exploiting various discursive strategies. Drawing upon systemic functional grammar, influence tactics, interdiscursivity, and rapport and rapport management, a total of 89 request e-mails were analyzed. The present study intends to bring to the fore the importance of the choice of language in professional communication in general, and in e-mail in particular, thereby enabling professionals to both encode and decode workplace communication in a more comprehensive manner.

INTRODUCTION

The importance and salience of professional communication is noticeably evident when we consider the huge amount of research interest and scholarly discussion it has drawn in the last two decades

(e.g. Sarangi & Roberts, 1999; Nickerson, 2002; Candlin & Hyland, 1999, Iedema & Scheeres, 2003). Among the many reasons why people – professionals, scholars and students (especially those who are entering into the workplace and those studying the English for Specific Purposes

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course or alike) – are paying so much attention to professional communication are, just to name a few, (1) communicative practices like talk and text are the thread which pull together the parts and parcels of workplaces since, according to Sarangi and Roberts (1999), “[w]orkplaces are held together by communicative practices” (p. 1); (2) one’s level of professionalism which is (or can be, at least) measured by one’s expert behavior is in turn measured by or reflected from one’s discursive competence (Candlin, 1999) manifested in one’s spoken and written communication; and (3) one’s communicative activity in the workplace, especially writing, is a “personal and socio-cultural act of identity” (Candlin & Hyland, 1999, p. 2), thereby enabling one to signal membership in the various “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998) that one is a member of (ibid) on the one hand, and construct desirable personal identities in their communities of practice on the other (Ho, 2010a, 2010b).

The importance of professional communication in the workplace as just stipulated above is therefore two-fold – it serves not only a transactional function in conveying meanings, but also a relational or interpersonal function in helping practitioners demonstrate their professionalism and construct and manage desirable identities. These two functions, again as explained briefly just now, are performed and realized through discourse, writing in particular. It is therefore essential for professionals, as well as professionals-to-be, to have a thorough understanding of the role of (written) discourse in workplace communication between and among professionals. Writing in today’s world can be done in ways other than in the traditional pen-and-paper one. Word processing software saves practitioners of various fields a vast amount of time, and so does e-mailing. Research suggests that e-mail has become increasingly important in workplace communication. It is now one of the main communication channels in such professions as education (Wamser, 2003),

healthcare (Goldner, 2006), law (Appleby, 2006), and business (Marinova et al., 2006). Such a popularity in the workplace makes it essential for one to first gain a clear understanding of the linguistics of e-mail, and second to make use of such linguistic knowledge in a way which can benefit oneself most in terms of the effectiveness of communication as well as the achievement of other personal aims like the construction of desirable identities (Candlin & Hyland, 1999; Ho, 2010a, 2010b).

Seeing the versatility of written discourse and the popularity of e-mail in professional communication, this chapter aims to, by focusing on the constitutive function (Fairclough, 1992) of the discourse of e-mail, bring to the fore the importance of the choice of language in professional communication in general, and in e-mail in particular, thus enabling professionals to encode and decode workplace communication in a more comprehensive manner. The next section Background discusses the theoretical frameworks of the present study including identity theories, the speech act request, the genre request e-mail, and the construct of communities of practice. The Methodology section first describes the three communities of practice in terms of the nature of their joint enterprise, cultural composition, and size. It then outlines the steps taken in collecting and analyzing the data – request e-mails. The Identities Constructed – What and How section will describe the identities the members of the communities of practice constructed through their request e-mail discourse, and the linguistic and discursive strategies and resources used in the construction. The Discussion section will explain the need for the members to construct different identities in the workplace while engaging in professional communication. Future Research Directions, as a forward-looking section, will discuss future and emerging trends in the same line of research. Finally, the Conclusion section will summarize the findings of the chapter.

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