

## A Discourse Analysis Approach to Email Communication on Ships\*

Milena Dževerdanović-Peجویć

**Abstract:** Emails have become an inevitable communication tool in a specific professional environment such as a ship. Changes that arose due to data digitalization, automatization and advances in communication systems have expanded the scope of internal and external ship business correspondence. Nevertheless, the structure of an email as a genre in seafaring has adapted to generic schemata in online communication and ship-specific communicative standards. Based on the genre analysis theories put forward by Swales and Bhatia, we analyse a corpus of emails collected from five foreign companies (100 pages of text). Then, the collected data were explained and interpreted concerning the contextual setting, primarily participants and their role in the given shipboard situation. The findings of this paper have pedagogical implications for creating teaching material for present and future ESP courses and introducing the concept of genre in establishing communication patterns in email correspondence on ships.

**Keywords:** Email communication, Ship, Genre analysis, Maritime discourse community

### 1. Introduction

Ship as an independent business unit has many genres related to correspondence which has been adapting to the changes in maritime affairs. The corpus of this paper comprises emails in the English language making 100 pages of text. These emails present external written communication, which was classified into two types: ingoing and outgoing correspondence. This kind of correspondence usually takes place between ship captains and other participants such as agents, charterers, port authorities or other parties. Keeping in mind the role of the master as the most responsible person on board the ship, we find that the corpus is representative and includes important aspects of the ship's commercial correspondence. The analysis of the structure and content of an email as a genre relies on the moves and step model set forward by Bhatia [1], Swales [2] and Lakić [3]. The aim of the

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paper is to point out how email reflects specific communicative purposes of the seafaring discourse community.

## 2. The concept of genre in a maritime setting

The need to identify recurrent language patterns, and the demand for specialized, professional and tailor-made courses in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), encouraged the research into language science through needs analysis, discourse and genre analysis. The concept of the genre has come from the study of literary genres to the studies of language, intending to study the recognizable structure and content of various types of communications used among members of a professional community. However, the study of genre in linguistics was heavily dependent on the context or pragmatic setting in which it is embedded. In order to know why specific texts are written in the way they are, we need to combine social, cultural and psychological aspects with linguistic knowledge [1]. The main feature of a genre is *its communicative purpose*, and the basic concept used in the language science regarding genres is a *discourse community*. *The discourse community* gathers the members that use a specific genre (be it a verbal or written genre) with the aim to obtain their *communicative goals* [2].

In the maritime discourse community, types of discourses and their genre features have been adapting to the communication needs of the shipping business. As the adjective 'maritime' refers to various marine and maritime-related activities, we assume that 'maritime discourse community' comprises many discourse communities. Depending on how the information is expressed, communication is categorized into verbal and written communication. In that light, a significant part of maritime communication goes to verbal VHF communication connecting many members of a maritime discourse community (VTS communication, ship-to-ship VHF communications) [4]. All these types of communicative activities utilize patterns of communication characteristic of a distinctive genre (such as the use of the nautical alphabet in VHF communication). In addition, communication about the berth includes many participants sharing their knowledge about the mooring ropes, activities and shore communication carried out during ship arrival or departure. Therefore, it can be said that verbal communication is somewhat more flexible and informal to a certain extent. Still, it does not relieve the participants from the responsibility for what they said and how they interpreted verbal statements (especially considering standardized communication and the normative languages such as the Standard Marine Communication Phrases). Email communication has replaced many written genres in shipping (conventional letter, telex) and has become a common means of written correspondence. It presents a reliable, fast and economical way to

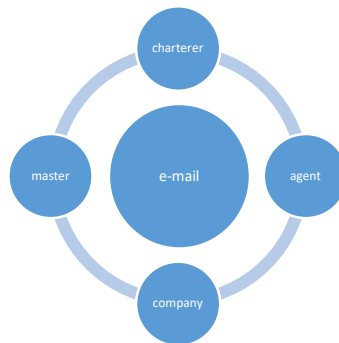
communicate the message and can be used in private and official communications [4]. Different genres such as shipping contracts, Bill of Lading, Charter Party, check lists, company guidelines, forms, reports, crew contracts, warnings to shipping, and circular safety messages have long ago become digital genres and obtained the prefix e- (electronic).

### 3. Method and Corpus

As said, the corpus of our paper consists of 100 pages of text obtained by the ship's masters sailing on foreign shipping companies. The material is divided into inward and outward communication: emails received and emails sent. We observed that ship's masters documented this communication in their computers, separated into different files, marked as 'ingoing' and 'outgoing' correspondence.

After reading the texts, we found that the most significant part of the commercial correspondence is carried out by email. The topics and participants in the emails vary from informal to formal. Everyday correspondence refers to greetings and personal letters. In contrast, the formal correspondence includes notifications on the ships' arrivals/departure, embarkation or disembarkation of the crew, claims, masters reports (damage to ship, activities on ship).

We shall present some typical structural features of email communication on board ships using the above-mentioned *move* and *step* model. To analyse the language material, we used the *WordSmith Tools 5.0* [5]. In addition to analysing syntactic, morphological and lexical features, we shall provide a qualitative analysis, i.e., an interpretation of participants' use of the linguistic means. For example, Figure 1 shows different participants involved in shipping business communication connected by email as a genre.



**Fig.1** – Some participants in ship's business using email

#### 4. Method and Corpus

In this part of the paper, we shall first present the email structure and then analyze each identified move.

##### A. The structure of emails in the shipping correspondence

The corpus analysis revealed that the structure of emails in shipping communications, to a great extent, follows the pattern of a business email. For example, the average length of emails is three to ten lines. The four identified moves are given in Table 1:

**Table 1** – *The structure of emails in the shipping correspondence*

Move 1	Salutation
Move 2	Introductory phrases
Move 3	The body of the email
Move 4	The complimentary close

##### *Move 1– Salutation*

The analysis revealed that out of 413 incoming emails, the salutation starts with *'Dear Captain'*. In addition, it was found that formal addressing (by surname) was found in 102 examples *'Dear Mr Smith'* whereas the introduction e.g. *"Dear Mr Smith"* was found in 54 instances.

In the outgoing correspondence in which the captain addresses the agent, charterer, port or consular authorities, the most common way of starting an email is with an informal *'Good day'*, as presented in Table 2.

**Table 2** – *The phrase 'Good day' in maritime correspondence [4]*

15	Dear Mr. K. <b>Good day. This is to confirm</b>
16	report attached. With many thanks. <b>Good day, Please be informed</b>
17	Radczyc on 04th of December. <b>Good day Please confirm that</b>
18	Shipping - TM, PM Dear Sirs <b>Good day You are kindly informed</b>
19	<b>Good day This is to confirm that.</b>
20	04-June-2012. With many thanks. <b>Good day, Your message well noted</b>
21	With many thanks Regards <b>Good day, Please be advised</b>
22	ailed report. With many thanks <b>Good Day, We have completed</b>
23	e belonged to me. Best regards <b>Good day, Please be informed</b>
24	Requisitions. With many thanks. <b>Good day, I am sorry. I had</b>
25	nd attached. With many thanks. <b>Good Day, Please be informed</b>
26	for us. Dear Captain P. <b>Good day. This is to confirm</b>

*Move 2- Introductory phrases*

Regarding the introductory phrases characteristic of the correspondence analyzed in our paper, we find that the authors of emails do not, to a large extent, utilize conventional phrases characteristic of the shipping business. Instead, they immediately move on to the core of the problem. Thus, the most elicited examples ensuing the informal salutation 'Good day' are: 'Please be informed that...', 'Please be advised that...', 'You are kindly informed that...', 'This is to confirm that...', 'Your message well noted'. Concerning the incoming emails in which the captain is asked or notified about something, out of 130 analysed introductions, 68 examples contain: 'You are kindly requested'. The polite introduction 'Please ...' is found in 38 instances and 'Thank you' in 24:

- (1) **You are kindly requested** to hand over to Mr Carlston.
- (2) **You are kindly requested** to resend as extract from ship accounting programme as excel sheet.
- (3) **Please find** attached bank letter for 2/0 Car as requested.
- (4) **FYI pls find** my mail to Mr. Firth below.
- (5) **Please kindly be noted** that the quarantine officer will be on board upon yr good vessel for inspection.
- (6) **Thank you** for your 2 messages dated 28/10, explanation much appreciated.

*Move 3 - The body of the email*

The main communicative aim of the correspondence in maritime shipping is the precision of information. Excluding abbreviations, collocations and maritime register terms, the analysis has revealed that the texts are organized, and that tone and style are adapted to a discourse of commercial correspondence. However, in order to correctly interpret emails, it is necessary to have knowledge of the world or an understanding of the context [6].

It would be impossible to classify emails according to their content as navigation and discourse types change. In this light, companies' rules concerning the possibility of sending emails change and affect the shaping of texts in terms of language. This can be explained by the fact that some ships impose restrictions on the number of allowed emails per day, as they can impede the performance of other automated information and communication networks on ships. In addition, we must bear in mind digitalization and the tendency to facilitate ship-to-shore communication [7].

## B. The content of an email

The content of emails in maritime correspondence is becoming more and more diverse. The fact is that e-correspondence enables an instantaneous flow of information and effective communications between ships and their parent company. By email, ships can send new notifications and circular letters usually sent by company management containing information on novelties in the company's administration or any other valuable notices. In addition, the so-called circular letters (fleet letters) sent to fleets regarding the topics such as safe routes and safety of navigation are regularly sent in electronic form. We shall illustrate an example of the email in which a company notifies the ship of the new measures aimed at protecting fleets from pirate attacks in the bay of Aden and the master's answer accordingly:

*(7) Captain,  
Further to 26/08/08 decision, the coalition force (USA, France, UK, Canada) has settled a maritime secured corridor in the Gulf of Aden in order to assist as much as possible in case of piracy act. When navigating in the Gulf of Aden please use this corridor.  
Best regards,  
Capt. A. P.*

What follows is the captain's answer. The answer is brief and contains the already noted elements of standard email communication (Good day, This is to...).

*(8) Dear Captain Pazdzioch,  
Good day,  
This is to confirm the safe receipt of your message and attachment Maritime Security Advisory - 02/2007 "Significant Threats to Golf of Aden Navigation: 2008". Many thanks.  
We should follow strictly these instructions and will instruct the crew accordingly.  
Captain*

A crucial aspect of ships' communication, as already said, deals with operational messages [4]. Operational correspondence encompasses different correspondents, such as ship masters, shippers, port authorities, carriers, agents, and refers to 'operational' procedures such as ship's arrival/departure, transition through a channel, berthing, anchoring, and cargo stowage. We evidenced about 145 'operative' emails in our corpus. They are short and look like service emails, and emails aiming to speed up service procedures

(order confirmation, postponement, scheduling, feedback, and email receipt). From a syntactic angle, these emails are short and employ abbreviations, such as in the following examples:

(9) *Good day,*

*Yr message well noted. Please be informed:*

*ETA Yantian is 1930 LT 03/08 Pilot Station.*

*ETB Yantian is 20:30 LT 03/08.*

*ETD Yantian 07:30 LT04/08.*

*If there are no changes whilst port stay in Yantian our best ETB for Hong Kong is around 13:00 LT 04/08. I will receive the schedule for Hong Kong after berthing in Yantian and you will be informed immediately.*

*Regards,*

*Master of HS Bizet*

Some examples of communication in our corpus refer to crew members signing on or signing off the vessel. Therefore, we also focused on analysing the syntactic and lexical features of this part.

#### *Communication about signing on/off crew members*

About fifty emails from our corpus refer to the embarkation and disembarkation of crew members. This requires much paperwork and email correspondence from arranging the embarkation port, flight tickets, payments, health certificates to visa admissions.

(10) *Dear Captain,*

*You are kindly requested to send the necessary invitation letter for arranging Chinese entry visa for **joiner** as the on-signer is of Serbian & Montenegrin nationality.*

(11) *Good day,*

***Onsigners** joined in Panama and **offsigners** left. Could you please advise Christmas bonus for **onsigners**?*

There is an evident tendency to convert the existing lexical units (conversion refers to making a new word class using an existing word), as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3 – Examples of conversion**

<b>Verb</b>	<b>Noun</b>
to sign on	On-signer
to relieve	Reliever
to sign off	Off-signer
to join	Joiner
to hand over	Handover (time)
<b>Verb</b>	<b>Adjective</b>
to join	Joining (officer)
to embark	Embarking (chief)
to disembark	Disembarking (mate)
to leave	Leaving (cadet)
to depart	Departing (crew member)

As shown in the table above, there are many conversion examples in the terminology about the crew change. The terms from general language are used to get a specific meaning. As we can see, the suffixation, such as the prefix – ‘on’ in *on-signer*, is prevalent in forming new, abbreviated forms. In this way, *on-signer*, *off-signer* and *joiner* denote crew members signing on/signing off/joining the vessel. The suffix –*er* is also used to indicate a person doing some activity as *in-joiner*, *reliever*, and *on-signer* and *off-signer* (double affixation). Some instances of abbreviations used to refer to crew members rankings are C/E (Chief Engineer), 2nd Eng. (Second Engineer), C/O (Chief Officer), and double forms such as E/E and El/E (Electrical Engineer), 3/Off and 3/O (Third Officer). Therefore, to understand the meaning of abbreviations in a specific setting, the employees in the shipping industry have to grasp and learn the related abbreviations pertaining to their professional background [8]. Other instances of abbreviations are those already established in business correspondence such as *pls* (*please*), *tnks*/*tnks* (*thanks*), *yr* (*your*), *asap* (*as soon as possible*), *abv* (*above*), *rcvd* (*received*), *LT* (*local time*), *asf* (*as follows*), and those belonging to maritime and/or aviation register such as (*ETA*- *estimated time of arrival*), (*ETB* - *estimated time of berth*), (*ETD* - *estimated time of departure*). Abbreviations in a technical and specialized language develop quickly and it is hard to evidence them. In that sense, there is a thin line between standard and non-standard forms of abbreviation and acronyms. Also, what seems to be a standard acronym in one register may be a non-standard in the other [4].



**Table 4 – Examples of abbreviations in emails**

Abbreviation	Full form (Standardized-S, Non standardized - NS)
OS	Ordinary seaman (S)
AB	Able-bodied seaman (S)
Recvd, rcvd	Received ( NS)
arrvl	Arrival (NS)
Av	Average (S)
asf	As follows (NS)
<i>e'ward</i>	Eastward (S)
LT	Local time (S)

*Move 4 – The complimentary close*

This specific maritime correspondence segment is present in most of the analysed emails. The examples of a standard ending that we detected in the above text are: *'Thank you', 'Thanks for your kind assistance', 'With many thanks', 'Thank you for your cooperation'*. However, it is noticeable that some standard endings prevalent in standard business emails such as *'Yours sincerely', 'Yours faithfully'* are found only in a few instances. Instead, ship masters prefer using *'Best regards'*, more precisely, its abbreviated form *'Brgds'*. We assume that this ending is taken from telex.

**5. Conclusion**

A genre analysis approach enables us to reveal specific characteristics of a genre embedded in a particular setting. For example, email as a genre in the maritime discourse community has taken over the conventional structural form of the traditional email. However, these changes have to be considered within a larger context and changes in global shipping. Namely, the globalization of discourse and the tendency to achieve efficient communication affected the choice of genre. In addition, modern information technologies enable ships to connect with shore-based computers and instantly send a large quantity of data. Thus, operational and service emails, manuals, fleet and circular letters are sent via email.

However, the language features of an email, most noticeable on a semantic level, differ from other commercial emails. In order to interpret a message correctly, the participants have to be familiar with 'the rules' of that particular genre. Regarding the changes in maritime business and the tendency to achieve the economy of discourse, we may expect that the email in shipping may be expected to take a more shortened format in the future. In that sense,

a genre analysis approach in exploring maritime written genres requires continuous research of the changes in maritime professional setting and cooperation with subject experts from the maritime field, which can be further applied in teaching specific maritime genres [9]. We believe that the genre analysis approach applied in this paper will inspire other scholars to discover recurrent features of different written or verbal maritime genres.

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Accepted:	01/05/2022	University of Montenegro
		Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor
		I Bokeljske brigade 44
		Kotor, Montenegro
		Email: milenadz@ucg.ac.me