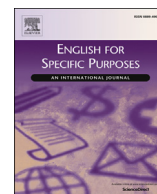


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Signalling intertextuality in business emails



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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the contribution of intertextuality to a text's coherence by examining the ways in which writers make use of recurrent words and phrases to signal instances of intertextuality in business emails. The data are a corpus of discourse flows comprised of two sets of interconnected emails read or written by two Hong Kong-based professionals. Key words and phrases in the corpus are identified using corpus linguistics software and then studied in context to determine whether they signal instances of intertextuality and, if so, whether they are predominantly used to signal prior or predicted texts. It is found that key words and phrases are associated with intertextuality and its directionality. The findings are also discussed in terms of how the power relations pertaining between the writer and reader influence the choice of language used and their wider implications for learning and teaching ESP.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to contribute to a fuller description of the properties of coherent professional discourse. Such studies are often hampered by the fact that it is not easy to collect the data because of their confidential nature or the unwillingness of organisations to collaborate. Studying the nature of professional discourse as process requires even greater access to the professional setting in which it occurs and the barriers are even higher for researchers. The result is that there is still relatively little research based on the discourse processes undertaken by professionals.

Before details of this study are introduced, the use of the terms 'discourse' and 'text' in this study need to be clarified because, among researchers in the field of discourse analysis, their definitions are not consistent. For example, [Stubbs \(1983: 9\)](#) points out that some use the term 'text' to refer to writing and 'discourse' to refer to speaking, while others, such as [van Dijk \(1997\)](#), differentiate between a text which is simply an abstract theoretical notion which is manifested in discourse. [Stubbs himself \(1983: 9–10\)](#) uses the two terms as synonyms and so sees no major difference between them. [Brown and Yule \(1983: 24\)](#), however, describe two different analytical approaches, "text-as-product" and "discourse-as-process", which is in line with [Gee's \(1999: 21\)](#) definitions of text and discourse. The former ignores how texts are created and interpreted while the latter "seeks to describe linguistic form" not as fixed but as dynamic in terms of communicating meaning ([Brown & Yule, 1983: 24](#)). Similarly, [Woods \(2006: x–xi\)](#) also distinguishes between discourse which she defines as language plus context and the "linguistic 'texts'" themselves. [Bhatia's \(2004: 19–21\)](#) perspective is different again in that he sees discourse analysis operating within a "four-space model" ([Bhatia, 2004: 18](#)): discourse as text (surface level discourse features), as genre (how text is used, interpreted and exploited in context), as professional practice (genre use in professional practice) and as social

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practice (inclusion of social and pragmatic knowledge). This study follows [Gee \(1999\)](#), [Brown and Yule \(1983\)](#) and [Woods \(2006\)](#) in its use of the terms ‘text’ and ‘discourse’.

This paper investigates the discourse processes and their email products that two professionals engage in as part of their daily work in Hong Kong, and it examines them in terms of their context-dependent intertextuality ([de Beaugrande, 1980](#)), and what [Devitt \(1991\)](#) terms referential intertextuality, which are essential components of a text’s coherence and, specifically, how instances of intertextuality are signalled by the writers by means of recurrent patterns of words and phrases in their email communication. The power relationship between the writer and reader is also monitored to determine whether this plays a part in the patterns the writers choose to employ.

The findings presented here are based on a larger project which shadowed professionals in their workplaces in order to observe and record their discourse processes and products for one week. All of the discourse events they engaged with were collected and detailed field notes and profiles of the professionals and their respective organisations supplement the data. Here, the email communication involving two professionals is investigated. The professionals, while operating in mainly English medium environments in Hong Kong, communicate through a combination of spoken languages (i.e. Cantonese, English and Mandarin/Putonghua) and primarily written English across a range of contexts. This study contributes to an informed understanding of how texts are interconnected and how the signalling of this interconnectedness is achieved. The signalling of intertextuality is an important component of the coherence of each successive text in what is termed a discourse flow (i.e. a chain of interconnected texts). An example of a discourse flow is given in [Figure 1](#) below to underline the important point that no text exists in isolation and all texts are intertextual in that they are comprised in part of previous texts and also typically prospect future texts.

[Figure 1](#) illustrates the notion of a discourse flow by highlighting one email (shown in **bold**) in the centre of a discourse flow. This email is connected to prior texts which make contributions to it and the email prospects connections to future texts which are predicted to occur by the writer of the email. Thus, the email at the centre of this discourse flow contains both prior and predicted texts and the same is also true for the other texts in the discourse flow.

The existence of discourse flows leads on to the notion of intertextuality (e.g., [de Beaugrande, 1980](#)), which refers to the intertwining of texts within the discourse flow whereby parts of a specific prior text becomes a part of other texts in a coherent manner. The information contained in the texts is ‘condensed, reformulated and reshaped to fit the purposes of the author’ ([Ventola, 1999](#): 109) and, in this sense, is intertextual in nature. Texts can also be intertextually prospective in that they typically also predict future texts ([Warren, 2013](#)). The notion of directionality ([Warren, 2013](#)), whereby instances of intertextuality refer to either prior or predicted texts, is also linked to the language used to signal intertextuality and is examined in this paper. Writers and speakers in professional contexts have to be able to employ intertextuality coherently as it is fundamental to professional literacy.

2. Intertextuality

The notions of intertextuality and coherence are related in that in creating a coherent text the writer or speaker needs to be able to handle its intertextuality appropriately. It has been pointed out by [Candlin and Maley \(1997](#): 203) that one of the components of discourse coherence is that a specific text is derived from a “plurality of sources”. This means that a specific text would lack coherence if it does not position itself relative to other texts within its respective discourse flow. This positioning involves the appropriate use of intertextuality by the writer.

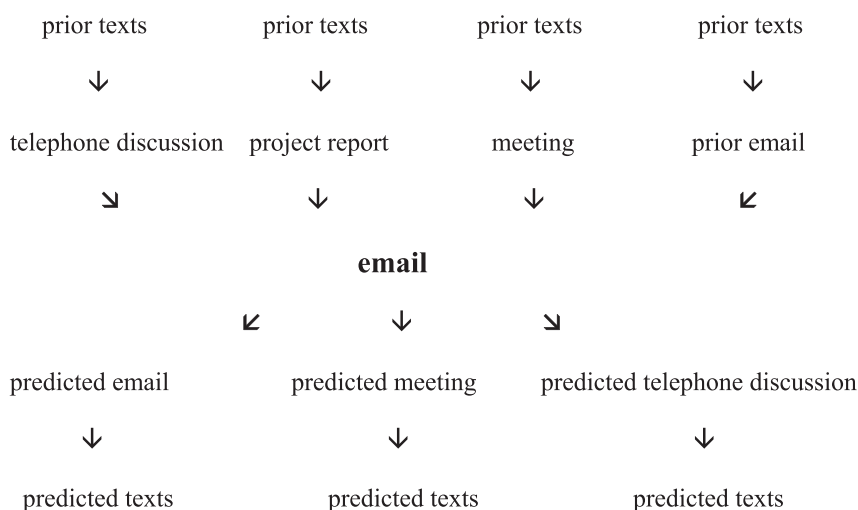


Figure 1. A discourse flow.

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