

Formal and functional characteristics of email hoaxes: a genre study

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of email hoaxing. Email hoaxes are deceptive messages that circulate in digital social networks through the forward function of email programs. The study is embedded in the question of genre change on the Internet: how genres evolve and migrate into the digital medium has recently become a central issue in research on computer-mediated communication. In this paper, a two-level genre ecology is proposed in which email hoaxes constitute a microlinguistically defined subgenre of Digital Folklore, the functionally defined supergenre. This model helps to further our understanding of how genre hybrids, which show properties of both the old and the new medium, are engineered at a linguistic level. Within this theoretical framework, a number of quantitative and qualitative analyses have been carried out. In particular, this paper describes the pragmatic and narrative structure of email hoaxes, as well as their propensity for textual change within the forwarding process.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.0 [Computers and Society]: General.

General Terms

Human Factors, Languages.

Keywords

computer-mediated communication, digital social networks, deceptivity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of genre has gone through a remarkable renaissance in the past two decades, and its mechanisms – genre emergence, genre change, possibly even genre death – have been the focus of much linguistic and discourse-analytical research in recent years. This is particularly true for studies in computer-mediated communication: the fast-paced emergence and change of discourse on the Internet has highlighted the question of whether new media foster new genres, and how these would have to be conceptualized [5]. The project presented here aims to contribute to this emerging field of research by offering an in-depth analysis of a substantial genre candidate, namely email hoaxing. Email hoaxes are messages containing a deceptive proposition that spread in digital social networks via the forward function of email programs [3, 4]. Email hoaxes therefore constitute an ideal object of analysis for the study of deceptivity in online communication: while the issues of deception and a low threshold of reliability are widely acknowledged to be of great pertinence to computer-mediated communication, few empirical studies have so far addressed the topic [1].

2. DATA AND METHODS

The study is based on a corpus of 147 different email hoaxes that offers a balanced view of the discourse form, as well as supporting *in situ* data collected from real occurrences on the Internet. It sets out by proposing a *prima facie* analysis as well as a content-based typology that yields five subcategories of email hoaxing.

Based on this preliminary description, a number of formal and functional analyses are carried out in the following chapters. Chapter 3 offers a microlinguistic analysis of the corpus, presenting major structural, lexico-grammatical and discursive features of email hoaxes. Chapter 4 examines the chronological factor in email hoaxing: it proposes a model for the life cycle of hoaxes and uncovers variation and change in their textual material. The pragmatic analysis in chapter 5 establishes a highly distinctive pragmatic duality as the conceptual backbone of email

hoaxing; email hoaxes are described as complex speech acts provoking an in-group/out-group split in the audience. Finally, chapter 6 examines narrativity in email hoaxes: narrative structures are revealed as a central characteristic of most items in the corpus; forwarding email hoaxes is found to be an economic way of acquiring tellable stories and narrative prestige.

Grounded in this descriptive basis, the issue of genre is re-examined in the concluding chapter 7. The genre continuum that surrounds email hoaxes is constructed, describing non-digital genre antecedents, neighbors in the genre ecology, as well as potential super- and subgenres. Ultimately, it is proposed that email hoaxing is not a self-contained genre, but a linguistically distinct subform of *Digital Folklore*.

3. RESULTS

From a linguistic and structural perspective, email hoaxes are characterized, among other features, by

- a dual structure of framework and core message;
- a recurrence of specific speech act patterns (in particular directives and commissives);
- a distinct dissemination pattern through social networks;
- a non-sincere core proposition that leads to pragmatic ambiguity;
- a narrative propensity.

Other frequent elements, such as the occurrence of names, vocatives, and irony markers reinforce the linguistic unity of email hoaxes. A further central factor in the makeup of email hoaxes is their propensity for textual change: the textual material of email hoaxes is highly instable and has a tendency for parallel existence and variation.

From a functional perspective, the dominant mechanism of email hoaxes lies in a dual pragmatic pattern: email hoaxes are designed to establish an in-group/out-group schema within the discourse community. For the in-group minority, their major purpose of engaging with a demonstration of one's own digital literacy and the out-group's lack thereof. However, it can be concluded that email hoaxes serve much more varied functions for the majority of out-group members. Some of these include:

- reinforcing digital social networks;
- affording interaction with texts (by allowing users to add or change its material);
- providing opportunities for (subjectively) cooperative behavior;
- economically supplying tellable stories.

This body of functional criteria suggests that email hoaxes are closely related to the pre-digital genre phenomenon of urban folklore. Urban folklore has been the focus of much ethnographic

research in the past decades, in particular with regard to officelore [2]. Among other parallels, email hoaxes satisfy the two central criteria of urban folklore, namely multiple existence and variation of textual artifacts. Urban folklore thus constitutes the pre-digital antecedent of the CMC phenomenon that can be termed *digital folklore*.

By consequence, a genre ecology can be constructed which contains digital folklore as a functionally defined supergenre that has its direct genre precursor in pre-digital urban folklore; its subforms are linguistically defined and constitute genuinely new subgenres such as email hoaxing, email petitions, prayer chains, etc. The email hoax therefore is a genre hybrid, with transmedial stability at the functional level but the emergence of distinctive linguistic and structural patterns at the formal level. This dual model for the first time explains the genre hybridization that has often been claimed for digital genres [5]: genres on the Internet often retain certain aspects of pre-existing genres as communicative function are a relatively stable aspect of discourse; by contrast, new microlinguistic forms develop with remarkable speed in new socio-technical environments. This study demonstrates on a broad empirical basis how genre hybridization is engineered at a textual and psychosocial level.

With this genre model, an unprecedented view on email hoaxes is offered: in contrast to the demonization of the phenomenon which has often prevailed in popular discussion, email hoaxing is revealed to be just one instantiation among many in the ecology of 21st century folklore.

4. REFERENCES

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