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LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHERS¹

1. Introduction. Digital communication in student-teacher relationships

With the spreading and technical development of electronic communication, new opportunities have emerged for exchanging written messages, which also influence the practice and linguistic features of written communication (Dürscheid 2005; Bódi 2004; Érsok 2007; Dürscheid–Frehner 2013; Veszelszki 2017; Domonkosi 2017). The routines of written communication are undergoing fundamental changes, communicative practices are being transformed, and previous patterns of linguistic interaction re-evaluated, with the consequence that problematic communicative situations also arise. With the advent of email and chat (instant messaging), new forms of written communication have been created. Although they follow the textual and stylistic schemas of traditional correspondence in certain respects, they also depart from them in several ways, displaying novel linguistic features as well.

Electronic communication between students and teachers in higher education may be considered a peculiar domain for two reasons. Firstly because of the fact that in the past decades, email correspondence has become a dominant channel in this type of interaction. This contrasts with the earlier practice whereby teachers and students resolved organizational matters primarily during contact hours and office hours rather than through written communication (cf. Reder 2007). Thus, the development of electronic communication has not simply created new technical opportunities for exchanging messages; it has also broadened the sphere of social actions performed via the written medium in student-teacher relationships. Several everyday activities including such matters as the sharing of teaching material and the organization of course attendance have been relocated into the domain of written communication. Moreover, since the new technology allows for the fast and frequent exchange of messages, student-teacher communication has become more intense (cf. Bloch 2002; Chejnova 2014; Dürscheid–Frehner 2013).

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Secondly, the communication of university students with their teachers is also a special area because students in higher education are in a peculiar social status with respect to the institutional hierarchy and their relationship with teachers (Halász 2001: 123). Teacher-student relationships are in part symmetric, as the students are trained to become experts and future colleagues, and in part also asymmetric on account of the hierarchical organization of universities. Some students first find themselves in adult linguistic roles at the scenes of communication characteristic of higher education, and consequently it is here that they acquire some of the relevant linguistic interaction practices (vö. Duff 2017). These factors make the study of online communication between university students and teachers a topical issue in international pragmatics (Hudson 2011; Merrison et al. 2012; Danielewicz-Betz 2013; Chejnova 2014) and sociolinguistics (Hariri 2017).

2. Research goals and methods

2.1 Research goals. The place of the study of email correspondence in the overall research

The present paper explores the linguistic features of email correspondence between university students and teachers as part of a comprehensive survey of addressing practices in higher education (see Domonkosi 2018a). It presents questions and preliminary results pertaining to how traditional, letter-based forms of linguistic interaction are transformed in discourses of digital written communication between students and teachers.

The phases of data collection completed so far suggest that written communication represents the most problematic area of linguistic interactions in higher education. This may result from the fact that oral communication is characterized by routinized practices to a higher extent, and it also leaves more room for negotiation and adaptation between discourse partners. The analysis to be presented here focuses on the opening and closing of interactions in emails written by students to their teachers (cf. Waldvogel 2007; Bou-Franch 2011; Spilioti 2011), and also examines the body of email texts to study linguistic operations shaping the relationship between discourse participants.

In an earlier study forming part of the overall research, we showed on the basis of overt metapragmatic reflections made in online conversations that the issue under discussion frequently becomes the focus of spontaneous, everyday metadiscourses, to an even higher extent than other questions of linguistic politeness (Domonkosi–Ludányi 2018). In reflections on the topic, there is clear evidence of the uncertainty of language users as well as their awareness of ongoing changes in linguistic practices.

Exploring interactions between students and teachers, the present paper zooms in on the following research questions: (i) what practices characterize written exchanges between students and teachers; (ii) how student-teacher

correspondence is to be situated on the scale of informality/formality; (iii) to what extent the text type of email preserves the features of traditional letters and in what ways it departs from it, i.e. how the digital medium influences the practice of linguistic interactions in the sphere of official written communication.

2.2. Research methods

Applying the principle of methodological congruence, we use several methods to see the extent to which their results converge (Bell 1976: 187–191). Based on a database compiled from university teachers' email correspondence, we explore linguistic features by studying emails written by students to their teachers. Numerous lecturers are actively involved in data collection through snowball sampling (cf. Babbie 1998: 312), and have so far contributed 680 letters to the database. Random sampling is ensured by the fact that each lecturer is required to submit, in an anonymised form, a record of their last 40 computer-mediated written discourses with students.

In order to learn about attitudes to particular linguistic features, we conducted focus group interviews, during which student groups were asked to evaluate emails selected from the database. A total of 3 conversations have been recorded so far, and preliminary results (the high number and emotional charge of students' opinions) have backed up the research hypothesis that this area is mired with linguistic problems from the students' perspective. In addition, we also rely on the results of a related investigation into addressing practices in the practice communities of higher education, which included the elicitation of opinions from students and teachers on written exchanges (Domonkosi 2018a).

All this was also supplemented by a questionnaire study involving 50 students as informants. In the productive task, students were asked to produce opening and closing formulas in emails to teachers as a function of gender, age, status, and context-dependent aspects of the relationship (e.g. kindness, the importance of the request). Our interpretation of results was also informed by personal observations and experiences about addressing practices in higher education.

In the present paper, we report on preliminary results on the basis of the first version of the database (consisting of 200 emails), observing trends that are already visible. In the discussion, we also refer to data gained by other methods which support or else demand the reinterpretation of results obtained in this way. All emails included in the first phase of the research were written to university lecturers working in teacher training and/or at the faculty of humanities. The teachers include 2 men and 3 women, each employed at one of two Hungarian universities outside of Budapest. The sample is representative for a very broad spectrum of students, however, since the teachers give courses in all types of study programs in the training of infant-care workers as well as kindergarten, elementary and secondary school teachers. Students participating in teacher training

are all the more important for the study of changing communicative practices in the speech community because this group will play a key role in institutional scenes of linguistic socialization, and thus also in the passing on of linguistic norms and customs. Due to a difference in the number of emails addressed to men and women, we have used a proportionalized sample of emails for making inferences about the role of gender.

3. Major linguistic features of teacher-student correspondence

In our study of communicative practices in higher education based on interviews with teachers, the subjects reported that the written exchange of messages (with special regard to address forms, greetings, and the casual style of letters) was clearly the most problematic area in their linguistic interactions with students. In our interviews with teachers, the opinions shown in (1) below can be considered typical.

(1)

a. *A levelezéssel már nagyobb gondok vannak, igen furcsa dolgokat tudnak írni a hallgatók.* (Int/Okt2)

'With email correspondence there are bigger issues, students sometimes write very strange things.' (Int/Okt2)²

b. *Ha idegen nyelven tudjuk nekik tanítani a levelezést, akkor magyarul miért nem?* (Int/Okt5)

'If we can teach them how to write letters in foreign languages, then why can't we do the same with Hungarian?'³ (Int/Okt5)

Based on the interviews, it seems to be a key problem that students use more informal linguistic devices than they are supposed to. A male interview subject around the age of 70 reported astonishment when he had received an otherwise very polite email from one of his students with the greeting *Kedves András!* 'Dear Andrew!', despite the fact that in spoken discourses, the greeting *tanár úr* '<address form of male teachers in secondary as well as higher education>' had been adopted as standard. In addition, teachers also noted the missing of greetings and other expressions of politeness; the use of greetings and other phrases characteristic of spoken discourse; and the use of inexplicit, insufficiently elaborate messages as impolite, strange and new aspects of students' written communication.

2 Interview details are labelled as follows: Int – Interview, Okt – Teacher, Hallg – Student, Arabic numbers refer to the ID number of the interview.

3 For details about the teaching of linguistic politeness formulas of correspondence in a foreign language, see Reder 2007.

The attitude of teachers working in higher education toward prevailing practices in email correspondence with students is also shown by texts collected from the internet (Domonkosi–Ludányi 2018: 98–104), in which teachers remark on controversial linguistic situations and also provide guidance with regard to expected linguistic behaviour.

3.1. Major trends in opening formulas

In the emails of students, the opening formula *Tisztelt Tanárnő / Tanár Úr!* is widespread independently of the status and age of the lecturer (65%). In this formula, the attribute *tisztelt* 'respected' is followed by *tanárnő* to address a female teacher or *tanár úr* to address a male teacher. To a lesser extent, the honorific attribute *kedves* 'dear' also appears (*Kedves Tanárnő / Tanár Úr!*) (31,5%.) We expect that the latter device is primarily used when the distance between teacher and student is smaller (cf. Domonkosi–Ludányi 2018). Our questionnaire study included a question differentiating between familiar and unfamiliar teachers in terms of how informants would address them, and in 64% of the answers, this variable clearly set the attributes *tisztelt* and *kedves* apart, showing the dominant role of this schema.

A further point worth mentioning about the honorific attributes *kedves* and *tisztelt* is that with male informants, *kedves* occurs in only around 21% of the full sample, whereas with female informants the corresponding figure is around 34%. That is to say, the more intimate form has a higher share in emails written by women.

With regard to gender-related differences, it can also be observed that the addressing of women displays a higher degree of variability, not only in the case of informal address forms but also when it comes to novel linguistic devices. We assume that a comprehensive study of the entire database will produce further results about the correlation between address forms and gender (cf. Domonkosi 2018b).

Students also use the full name of their instructors in emails, dropping the position marker: *Tisztelt/Kedves [full name]!* The more frequent form is also *tisztelt* here, as the phrase including this attribute accounts for 4,5% of the sample, with *kedves* only at 1%. This is in line with the general tendency that position marking becomes less pronounced in interpersonal relationships. The form just mentioned is mainly used by students in writing. Address forms lacking positional markers have a more person-oriented, identifying function, and are increasingly common in impersonal, official correspondence. In the context of higher education, they may be perceived as lacking the honorific function that students are expected to express in their interactions with teachers (Domonkosi 2017: 293; Domonkosi–Ludányi 2018: 94). Indeed, they may well be considered impolite. This issue was brought up by one of the students in a focus group interview who had addressed her teacher in a letter by *Tisztelt [full name]*, only to receive the following answer (2):

(2)

Így az adóhivatal szokott megszólítani. (Int/Hallg2)

'Normally I'm addressed like this by the tax authority.' (Int/Hallg2)

In the emails under study, the form *Tisztelt* + positional marker (*Tanszékvezető* 'head of department', *Dékan* 'dean') *Asszony/Úr!* ('Madam/Sir') also appears in a low number. It is mostly documented in emails asking for favours (e.g. raising the number of admissible students for a course), or when the teacher is approached by someone who does not know him/her, and the request is related to his/her status.

The database also includes one instance of a student addressing the teacher by *Kedves [Given name]!* (0,5%).

One trend that has been evident since the appearance of new genres of written communication (email, chat) involves the adoption of opening formulas and greetings of oral communication, so that traditional formulas characteristic of letters become marginal. Such opening formulas are increasingly accepted, as shown by the fact that they occur even in official (V-type) relationships demanding politeness to a higher extent. Thus, the traditional differences between opening formulas of written and spoken discourse have become increasingly blurred (Domonkosi 2004: 9). This is very typical of the present-day generation of students.

The greeting *Jó napot (estét) Tanárnról!* is very common (*jó napot* '[I wish you a] good day', *jó estét* '[I wish you a] good evening') (1%). The use of this form generally departs from standard orthography, with the comma always missing before the address form. This form may have developed analogically on the basis of *Szia(,) [Given name]*, accepted in informal letters, and the reason of dropping the comma may be that the greeting takes the place of the attributes. Occasionally, creative and more personal forms also occur, for example *Napsugaras jó reggelt kedves [Keresztnév]!* 'I wish you a good morning with plenty of sunshine [Given name]', which is highly unusual also because the student is addressing the lecturer by her given name in a V-type relationship.⁴

Our data also include the opening formula *Jó napot kívánok!* 'I wish you a good day', which does not feature any address form. Probably this can be put down to the fact that in digital communication, the linguistic identification of discourse participants is less relevant (as a function of the underlying technology), thus the greeting function of an opening formula becomes more important than its addressing function. In our data, one example was also found for *Üdvözlöm* (literally 'I am greeting you'), which also expresses the speech act of greeting in a way that is characteristic of spoken discourse.

4 Following Brown and Gilman's (1960) dichotomous view of address introduced in their classic paper, T stands for informal, while V for formal, official, more distanced address.

An additional point worth observing is that the opening formula may be differentiated according to parts of the day: *Jó reggelt/napot/estét kívánok!* 'I wish you a good morning/day/evening'. Presumably, this reflects the assumption made by university students that their teachers are also continuously online just like them, members of the Z generation, the "digital natives" (Prensky 2011). The same interpretation is also supported by various questions raised by university students on internet forums, for example *Illetlenség egyetemi tanárnak hétvégén e-mailt küldeni?* 'Is it indecent to send an email to a university lecturer at the weekend?' (Domonkosi–Ludányi 2018: 98). The students assume that the email immediately reaches the addressee, which is presumably why they wonder whether it is impolite to send an email at the weekend, and employ a greeting adjusted to the part of day instead of a traditional address form. The assumption of continuous online presence also motivates the fact that letters sometimes start with elaborate excuses such as *Elnézést a kései levélért [...] 'I apologize for the late message [where late means 'sent in the evening hours']*.

At first it might seem puzzling that the frequency of forms deviating from the traditional ones (*Tisztelt/Kedves Tanárnő/Tanár úr!*) is not particularly high in our database, and still, university lecturers consider the written communicative behaviour of students (their expression of respect/politeness) very problematic. The likely reason is that as a general feature of perception, discrepancies from the norm are more salient, they have a larger cognitive impact, with the consequence that the change may seem greater than it actually is.

3.2. Linguistic features of the letter body and the letter as a whole

The spreading of email exchanges between university students and teachers does not simply supersede traditional correspondence but also allows for much more intense communication. Emails facilitate the resolution of a range of organizational issues as well as problems encountered by teachers and students, from the justification of absences to the sharing of teaching material (cf. Weiss–Hanson–Baldauf 2008).

The fact that so many issues can be resolved by email increases the speed of administration, resulting in very short messages even in the case of letters intended to be polite. The linguistic devices of short messages bring the text type of email close to chat-based communication (cf. Domonkosi–Kuna–Ludányi 2019). The message in (3) below is a striking example of how different forms of communication are mixed in emails. On the one hand, it includes two greetings, thereby evoking spoken discourses, as these speech acts build on the simultaneous presence of interlocutors. On the other hand, it makes the action performed by the email highly explicit, and is also supplemented by a traditional closing formula.⁵

5 Here and elsewhere, the translations remain close to the original Hungarian construal rather than aiming for authenticity in an English-speaking environment.

(3)

Jó napot kívánok!
 Mellékelve küldöm a dolgozatot.
Viszontlátásra!
Tisztelettel:
 [Vezetéknév] [Keresztnév] (D22)

'Have a good day!
 Attached I am sending my home paper.
 Goodbye!
 Respectfully,
 [Surname] [Given name]⁶ (D22)⁷

Despite the brevity of emails, the letter body may include linguistic representations of the teacher being addressed in the form of various references to his/her person. In pronominal designations found in emails, the pronoun *Ön* 'you (formal)' typically occurs, its prominence enhancing the honorific function of the text. As a device contributing to polite and official construal, in certain letters it becomes more prominent than necessary. This is illustrated by (4) below.

(4)

*A nevem [Vezetéknév] [Keresztnév] és felvettem **Önnél** a Szövegtan gy. elnevezésű tantárgyat. Sajnos 2018. március 2-án, munkahelyi kötelezettségeim miatt nem tudtam megjelenni az órán. Az iránt szeretnék érdeklődni, hogy tudom e így is teljesíteni **Önnél** a tantárgyat? Amennyiben igen, megkérhetem **Önt**, hogy küldje meg számomra a vizsga követelményeket?* (D1)

'My name is [Surname][Given name], and I have taken a course in Textual linguistics **by you**. Unfortunately on 2 March 2018 I wasn't able to attend the lesson because of duties at my workplace. I would like to inquire if I can still complete this course **by you**? If so, can I please ask **you** to send me the exam requirements?' (D1)

In reference to the teacher being addressed, the pronoun *Maga* 'you (formal)' occurs in one instance (see (5)). In teacher-student relationships, this pronoun is not conventionally accepted because of the hierarchical difference involved. Its use shows the student's lack of firm knowledge about the social value attached to forms of interaction.

6 Students' emails are reproduced in an anonymised form with the designations [Surname] and [Given name] depending on whether the student used his/her full name or only one element thereof.

7 The markings refer to the database identifier of the e-mail.

(5)

*A kérdésem, hogy most 15-én hány órától meddig volna erre lehetőség, mert [Vezetéknév] tanárúr is aznap irat 2 zh-t, de nekem fontos volna, hogy javítsak a **maga** tárgyából.*⁸ (L201)

'My question is when this would be possible on the 15th because Professor [Surname] is also having us write two in-class tests on the same day but it would be important for me to improve my grade in **your** course.' (L201)

In prominent positions, within requests intended to be especially polite, the letter body also includes nominal references to the teachers, as in (6) below.

(6)

*Tisztelettel kérem **Tanárnőt**, engedje meg, hogy ebben a félévben leadjam a kurzust és jövő félévben felvegyem.* (D10)

'I respectfully ask **Tanárnő** [literally, Miss Teacher] to allow me that I drop this course in this term and take it again in the next term.' (D10)

The example in (7) below is special in its choices for referring to the teacher. Whereas in the opening address form, the email's writer uses the teacher's full name to address her (which is considered less polite), the letter body includes highly polite nominal and pronominal forms.

(7)

Kedves [Vezetéknév] [Keresztnév]!

Első éves óvodapedagógia hallgató vagyok és önnel lesz dráma- és bábjáték a nyelvi kommunikációs nevelésben óráim.

*Elnézést kérek **tanárnő** a zavarásért [...]* (L69)

'Dear [Surname] [Given name],

I am a first-year student in kindergarten pedagogy and I will have a class with **you** on the use of drama and puppet play in linguistic communicative education.

I apologize to you, **tanárnő**, for disturbing you.' (L69)

The length of emails and the prominence with which the teacher is linguistically represented depend on the importance and function of the speech acts being performed. The database compiled from teachers' correspondence with students will also support a more detailed study of such correlations.

8 Emails are reproduced in their original form, including spelling mistakes.

3.3. Major trends in closing formulas

With regard to the closing of emails, the database gives evidence of the existence of two trends; in particular, a distinction can be made between one-step and two-steps closures. We speak of one-step closure when the message ends with a single closing or farewell formula. This may be a traditional formula such as *üdvözlettel* 'with greeting' or *tisztelettel* 'with respect; respectfully', but there are also unique, novel ways of expressing one's best wishes. In two-step closures, these forms are combined and the resulting speech act cluster reinforces the phatic role of communication, as in (8).

(8)

További szép napot kívánok!

Tisztelettel: [Vezetéknév] [Keresztnév]

'I wish you a nice continuation of the day.

Respectfully: [Surname] [Given name]'

Closing wishes display a high degree of variability (9). Similarly to greetings in opening formulas which are adjusted to the part of day, wishes that appear before closing formulas also indicate an assumption of online presence, as they construe transient features of the speech situation. We assume that unique, innovative expressions of good wish reflect the students' distance-reducing strategy, their role is to make the letters more personal. The interviews suggest that they specifically occur in letters which are intended to express a high degree of kindness.

(9)

Nagyon szép napot kívánok önnek! 'I wish you a very nice day'

További szép napot/estét (kívánok)! 'I wish you a nice continuation of the day/evening'

További szép estét, Tanárnő! '[I wish you] a nice continuation of the evening, <form of address directed at female teacher>'

Szép hétvégét kívánok! 'I wish you a nice weekend'

Kellemes nyári időtöltést! '[I wish you] a pleasant summer holiday'

Kellemes húsvéti ünnepeket Tanárnőnek! 'I wish you <form of address directed at female teacher> a pleasant Easter holiday'

Among wishes expressed in closing formulas, the most common is (*További szép napot!* '[I wish you] a nice continuation of the day' (4,5%)), which is used as a farewell formula in both T and V spoken discourse. In the letters under study, another, partially different function can also be discerned: it can express good wish as part of a two-step closure. Beyond the presumption of continuous online presence, linguistic devices highlighting transient aspects of the speech situation (part of day, season, holidays, etc.) also indicate the fact that

the student is striving to opt for a more personal construal than is afforded by traditional formulaic expressions.

3.4. Shortening letters, the dropping of address forms and closures

In the wake of technological advances in email correspondence, multi-turn email conversations (threads) have become increasingly popular, going hand in hand with the shortening of messages. It can be observed that from the second turn onwards, addressing and closing formulas may be dropped by the student and/or the lecturer, indicating the fact that multi-turn letters become increasingly similar to conversations. The dropping of opening and closing formulas shows the influence of online, real-time communication (chatting) on electronic correspondence, and it is a general feature of emailing practices (Érsök 2007; Veszelszki 2017). Students are more likely to drop these formulas, which may seem impolite in view of the hierarchical nature of the teacher-student relationship. This is especially the case when the teacher has not dropped them yet in previous turns of the thread, perhaps even using them in a highly consistent manner. In the turns of a conversation shown in (10), the teacher and the student implement very different emailing strategies.

(10)

Kedves Hallgatók!

Legyenek szívesek visszajelezni, ki várható a holnapi alkalmon. (Nemleges válasz esetén is kérek szépen visszajelzést.) Köszönöm szépen.

Üdvözlettel

*[Vezetéknév] [Keresztnév]
egyetemi adjunktus*

(hallgatói válaszlevél)

Én nem tudok menni. (L44)

'Dear Students,

Please be so kind as to inform me who is going to attend the lesson tomorrow. (Please also send a message when the answer is negative.) Many thanks.

Best regards,

[Surname] [Given name]

assistant professor'

(reply from a student)

'I can't go.' (L44)

During interviews, lecturers also report the problem that home assignments are sometimes sent to them as email attachments without any accompanying message, i.e. the interpersonal relationship does not receive any overt expression (contrary to what would be expected in a letter), only the act of submitting homework is accomplished. Our data suggest that most lecturers consider this impolite; in their view, the hierarchical nature of teacher-student relationships requires more elaborate messages which also indicate the nature of the relationship. We have evidence showing that lecturers sometimes voice their concerns to students over the impolite construal of emails, considering it as an educational, socializational task inherent in teacher training to shape the students' knowledge and skills in the exchange of written messages. For example, the letter in (11) below clearly serves to educate the student about good manners.

(11)

Kedves [Keresztnév]!

Köszönöm szépen az alapos, lelkiismeretes munkájukat, kérem, tolmácsolja csoportársainak is.

Egy jó tanács a jövőre nézve, ami hasznos lehet az egyetemi életben való boldogulásához: amikor elküldi az oktatónak a házi feladatot, azt javaslom, írjon mellé néhány sort is, például valami ilyesmit: „Kedves Tanár Úr / Tanárnő! Mellékelten küldöm a XY tárgyból a házi feladatot, üdvözlettel N. N.” Higgye el, így sokkal elegánsabb, udvariasabb, és az oktatóban is pozitívabb benyomást kelt.

*Sikeres félévet kívánva üdvözlettel
[Vezetéknév] [Keresztnév] (L202)*

'Dear [given name],

Many thanks for your thorough, conscientious work, please also pass on my message to other members of your group.

One piece of advice with a view to the future, which may be beneficial for your academic career: when you are sending homework to your teacher, I suggest that you add a few lines of text, something like this: "Dear Sir/Madam, attached please find my homework for this-and-this course. Best regards, N.N." Believe me when I'm saying that this is much more elegant and polite, making a more positive impression on the teacher.

Wishing you a successful semester,
[full name]' (L202)

4. Summary, conclusions

New forms of communication emerging in the practice of exchanging written messages follow the patterns of traditional correspondence in certain respects, but also depart from them in many ways. For interpreting ongoing developments, it is crucial to take into account the fact that written exchanges between teachers and students do not simply result from the transformation of traditional correspondence. Instead, what we witness is that short written messages have acquired a broader set of functions, and compared to previous periods, more intense communication has become possible through online presence in this type of relationship as well. The directness and immediacy of interactions pushes emailing practices toward the use of more informal and personal linguistic devices, with even student-teacher email correspondence (which can be considered official) affected by the typical linguistic devices of related digital text types (chat, comment) (Domonkosi–Kuna–Ludányi 2018).

Our preliminary results suggest that in the opening and closing of emails, acts of greeting and good wishes become prominent beside the functions of addressing and referring to persons. The data reveal that most emails follow traditional patterns. Despite the abundance of reports from both students and teachers about ongoing changes, striking, individual and innovative devices are less frequent than conventional forms of correspondence.

Our database of emails is expanding continuously, and supports our research goal of describing changes in interaction patterns. The picture that has emerged so far needs to be refined with regard to what factors, background variables influence the preference of more informal or more formal schemas. In particular, it remains an open question precisely how interaction strategies are affected by the teacher's gender, age, status and degree of familiarity; what differences show up between different study programs and practice communities in higher education.

In view of the role of higher education in socialization, it is also an important research question whether students' emailing practice is modified during the years they spend at universities. Since teacher training crucially involves the teaching of communicative skills, our goal is not only to provide a descriptive survey but also to disseminate results and to raise awareness of the functions of various linguistic devices. These aims follow from our belief that university lecturers have a role in setting patterns and passing on customs and traditions of written communication.

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