

The style of academic e-mails and conventional letters: contrastive analysis of four conversational routines

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a corpus-based study which investigates the genre of academic e-mail and more specifically its pragmatic dimension. Four conversational routines (*thank yous*, apologies, requests, offers) are analysed and compared in two channels: academic e-mails and conventional print letters. In addition, data from both native and non-native speakers of English is considered, which sheds light on some of the differences found in the academic e-mail writing of learners of English. The findings indicate that academic e-mail is a relatively formal type of correspondence which is still largely influenced, as is to be expected, by the genre of the academic letter, and that as a genre, academic e-mail is in the process of formation or semi-formation. Finally, native speakers of English are found to be more informal than non-native speakers of English in academic e-mails.

Key words: Electronic English for academic purposes (e-EAP), computer-mediated communication (CMC), corpus-based study, contrastive analysis, pragmatics

Resumen

Estilo del correo electrónico académico y de las cartas convencionales: análisis contrastivo de cuatro rutinas conversacionales

En este artículo se presenta un estudio de corpus que analiza el género del correo electrónico académico y, más específicamente, su dimensión pragmática. Se estudian cuatro modelos conversacionales (agradecimientos, disculpas, peticiones y ofrecimientos) a través de dos canales: correos electrónicos académicos y cartas convencionales. Asimismo, se toman en consideración datos procedentes de hablantes de inglés, tanto nativos como no nativos, para determinar diferencias en los correos electrónicos académicos que han sido escritos por estudiantes de inglés. Los resultados indican que el correo electrónico académico es un tipo formal de correspondencia influido por el género de la carta académica y que, como género, el correo electrónico académico se halla en un proceso de formación o de semi-formación. Finalmente, el estudio demuestra que los hablantes nativos parecen ser menos formales en el uso del inglés que los hablantes no nativos en la producción de correos electrónicos académicos.

Palabras clave: inglés electrónico con fines académicos, comunicación asistida por ordenador, estudio de corpus, análisis contrastivo, pragmática

Introduction

Although the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has been prominent since its inception forty years ago, the influence of the Internet on academic writing has yet to be more thoroughly researched. This is rather surprising since academic research has played a major role in the exponential increase in use of electronic mail (e-mail) for communication. Jones (1999: 10) and Newhagen and Rafaeli (1997) recall the importance of the academic world in the inception of Internet.

Thinking about academia's role vis-à-vis the Net, we are reminded that what we call the Net today has roots in the Internet, Bitnet, and Arpanet, all partly academic institutions. Just at the point in history when critical voices speak of the decreasing relevance of research and universities, along come the Net and its attendant large-scale commercial, industrial, organizational, and social relevancies. In large measures, the Net can be considered an academic accomplishment. As you indicate, this alone behoves our involvement. Much of the morphology and culture of the Net, the practice of information exchange, and the very emphasis on information and the symbolic are all traditional academic messages. (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1997)

Even though some researchers have explored electronic academic texts (Herring, 1996; Mardziah, 1998; Pérez-Llantada Auría & Plo-Alastrué, 1998; Gains, 1999, and Luzón-Marco, 2002), there is still much that needs to be considered.

Method of analysis

The present paper analyses the genre of academic e-mail and more particularly its style and the pragmatic competence of native and non-native speakers of English. The framework of the study is what Posteguillo (2002) refers to as "electronic-English for Academic Purposes". This sets this research in the emergent field of "netlinguistics" which Posteguillo views as an area of Applied Linguistics consisting of the linguistic study of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) or other electronically published texts.

The study compares academic e-mails and academic letters in paper format retrieved from the correspondence of four senior researchers within the fields of English for Specific Purposes, Medicine, and Chemical Engineering. As suggested by Hyland

(2000), academic writing can display generic, as well as disciplinary, variations. However, in this paper only the generic dimension will be considered.

The pragmatic perspective taken here focuses on the choice of the variables which are the strategies used to perform four conversational routines (formulaic speech acts) in the texts (academic e-mails and conventional letters) of the corpus. These are *thank yous*, apologies, requests and offers. Also, two major pragmatic theoretical frameworks –the Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969) and the concept of Politeness as presented in Brown and Levinson (1987)– are central to this research project.

The findings help us appreciate to what extent the style of academic e-mails is comparable to that of traditional academic letters and whether e-mails tend to be more informal than the latter. The thanking, apologising, requesting and offering expressions of native speakers of English (NSE) and non-native speakers of English (NNSE) in academic e-mails and conventional letters are also compared in order to measure the level of competency of NNSE in electronic academic writing.

A survey (see Appendix) was conducted to find out more about the use of e-mail by researchers and its function within scientific research. A questionnaire was sent to approximately two hundred researchers and shows that e-mailing has become the most privileged means of communication among scholars. 85% of the researchers who answered stated that e-mail is the communication tool most favoured within their profession. One of the main reasons for this change seems to be related to its expediency. The responses show that e-mail is habitually used for collaborating with colleagues, exchanging information and organising the publication of articles. The answers also suggest that researchers may be more informal in this new means of communication, as indicated by the following quotes from the questionnaires returned: “It has led to much greater familiarity and friendliness, there is greater tendency to establish a rapport between colleagues, a decrease in academic aloofness” and “Closer/quicker/easier contacts with colleagues/other researchers/journal editors”.

Data (inclusion and exclusion criteria)

Since English is considered the *Lingua Franca* of scientific research and, as Hyland (2000) points out, is the first language of many researchers, the focus is on e-mails and conventional letters written exclusively in English. The e-mails serve as an

“experimental group”, whereas conventional academic letters are used as a “control group”. All texts of the corpus are of a professional nature. In order to avoid variations related to power status, the e-mails considered are all addressed by a researcher/editor to a researcher, or, by a researcher to an editor. I consider that the status of the writers is quite similar, given that all the editors within the corpus are also researchers. The situational context is analogous for both corpora, but this academic context presupposes relatively strong socio-pragmatic constraints on the production of texts. These academic exchanges require a certain degree of formality on behalf of the writers who are acting as members of their research community and also represent their own research which will later be evaluated by the rest of their discourse community. The exchanges studied are therefore essentially formal, which subscribes to Baron’s classification of e-mails into formal and informal e-mails:

One likely resolution is that two distinct styles of e-mails will emerge, one that is informal (and often unedited) and the other which is formal (and edited), comparable to the ranges of style that already exist in speech and writing. (Baron, 2000: 242)

Altogether the corpus contains 152 messages, amongst which 66 are conventional letters and 86 e-mails. The table below (Table 1) illustrates that the writers are rarely the authors of more than one message.

	Corpus of e-mails	Corpus of letters
Number of messages in total	86	66
Number of writers in total	53	45
Average number of messages per sender	1.62	1.46

Table 1. Description of the corpus.

Tables 2 and 3 focus on the origin of the writers. The proportion of native and non-native speakers of English in the corpus reflects the cultural diversity of scientific research.

Native speakers of English	Corpus of e-mails	Corpus of letters
United States	29	26
Great Britain	13	15
Ireland	2	1
Unknown	2	0
Total number of messages written by NSE	46	42

Table 2. Native speakers of English in the corpus.

Non-native speakers of English	Corpus of e-mails	Corpus of letters
Denmark	6	1
Holland	1	0
Argentina	3	0
Jordanian	1	0
India	3	0
Hungarian	2	0
Brazil	3	0
Sweden	1	0
Italy	1	3
Greece	0	1
Venezuela	1	4
France	7	5
Finland	5	2
Germany	0	1
Russia	1	0
Belgium	3	0
Israel	1	0
Japan	0	5
Austria	0	2
Unknown	1	0
Total number of messages written by NNSE	40	24

Table 3. Non-native speakers of English in the corpus.

Categorisation of e-mails and letters

Prior to the analysis, the corpus of e-mails and letters was organised according to the main communicative purpose of the e-mails or letters considered.

Speech Act Theory and the concept of Politeness naturally led to organising the texts of the corpus into four categories. Brown and Levinson's model of positive and negative face was used as a means to devise these categories.

Central to our model is a highly abstract notion of "face" which consists of two specific kinds of desires ("face wants") attributed by interactants to one another: the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions (negative face), and the desire (in some respects) to be approved of. (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 13)

Negative face is often described as the speaker's "territory", whereas positive face corresponds to the speaker's need to be appreciated by others. Both positive and negative faces are considered at risk when we interact. In this paper, the term "face work techniques" refers to the cooperative strategies used to protect the faces of the

addressee in order to maintain the stability of exchanges. The four categories of e-mails/letters are presented below.

1. FPF: E-mails or letters (potentially) flattering for the positive face of the recipient. In these texts the sender shows gratitude towards the recipient.
2. TPF: E-mails or letters (potentially) threatening for the positive face of the recipient. The nature of these texts is often apologetic.
3. TNF: E-mails or letters (potentially) threatening for the negative face of the recipient. All the texts within this category contain one/more than one request. The sender's aim is often to get the recipient to do something for him/her.
4. FNF: E-mails or letters (potentially) flattering for the negative face of the recipient. The texts are often "response messages", i.e. the sender answers a preceding message.

Table 4 below shows that the proportion of these four types of messages in each sub-corpus is quite alike.

	Corpus of e-mails (%)	Corpus of letters (%)
Messages FPF	24 (27.9)	16 (24.2)
Messages FNF	24 (27.9)	14 (21.2)
Messages TPF	10 (11.6)	15 (22.7)
Messages TNF	28 (32.5)	21 (31.8)

Table 4. Types of message.

Variables

The intrinsic nature of the variables causes each of them to be characteristic of one type of message. The amount of *thank yous*, apologies, requests and offers in each of the four categories of e-mails/letters (see Figures 1 and 2 below) shows that in both corpora: apologies are used predominantly in TPF messages, *thank yous* are characteristic of FPF messages and requests are found mainly in TNF messages. Finally, offers are most often used in FNF messages, which connects with the nature of offers; a speech act which is flattering for the recipient's negative face ("territory").

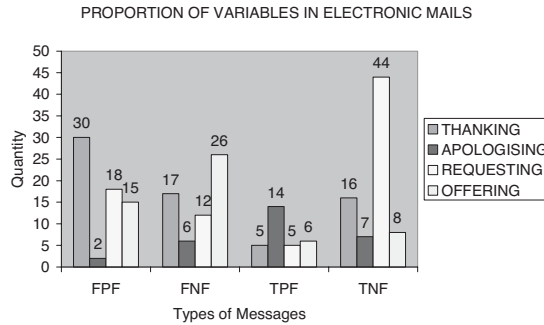


Figure 1. Variables in electronic mails.

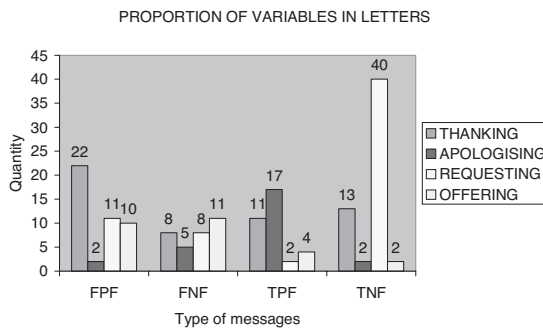


Figure 2. Variables in letters.

Requests and offers, which are often accompanied by expressions comparable to politeness rituals, can be interpreted as ritual speech acts like thanking and apologising. However, contrary to thanking and apologising, they can potentially be realised by an unlimited number of strategies (Aijmer, 1996). The part of the routines which will receive most attention is their stem, i.e. the core of the conversational routines studied. The aspects of the routines studied are their distribution in e-mails/letters, their degree of politeness and structural flexibility.

Results

Originally, all the routines in the e-mails/letters of the corpus were reviewed, but only recapitulative tables will be provided here (Tables 5-8). These tables indicate the number of occurrences of each variable in e-mails and letters. Percentages are provided between brackets to emphasise which strategies are used the most to realise the four routines under investigation.

The Chi square test was applied to the results as a means of assessing whether the variations observed were statistically significant, although the corpus was relatively small. The alpha value was set up at $p < .05$ (p = probability level). Therefore, $p < .05$ indicates that the two corpora are different and that the identified difference is not due to chance. NS (not significant) indicates that the differences observed were not statistically noteworthy. Finally, when $p = .05$ the difference is “borderline”. Many differences were found to be significant (see Tables 5-8). However, there were a few instances when the differences observed were seemingly statistically significant but for which only a small proportion of the variables was taken into consideration to carry out the statistical test. It was therefore difficult to determine whether or not the non-use of the routines was statistically relevant in such cases. These probability levels have been marked with an asterisk where applicable (e.g, Table 5: “ $p = .03^*$ ”).

Strategies for *thank yous*

The stems used to realise thanking strategies are: *Thanks, Thank you, Thanking you, Be + pleased, It + be nice* and the verb *appreciate*. Most of the thanking strategies use of one of the stems derived from *Thank*.

Thanking strategy	E-mails (%)	Letters (%)	Chi square test
<i>Thanks</i>	34 (50)	8 (14.8)	$p = .0001$
<i>Thank you/thanking you</i>	28 (41.2)	37 (68.5)	$p = .0091$
Anticipated thanking	3 (4.4)	6 (11)	$p = .09$
<i>Appreciate</i>	0	3 (5.5)	$p = .0075$
Other	3 (4.4)	0	$p = .03^*$
Total	68	54	

Table 5. Distribution of thanking strategies

Strategies for Apologies

The stems used most often are formulated with *Sorry*. Although they are used in a much lesser proportion, the following linguistic expressions are also stems for apologies: *Unfortunate, Apologise, Regret. Be + afraid and Feel + badly* fall under the category “other” and are used in both sub-corpora.

Apologising strategy	E-mails (%)	Letters (%)	Chi square test
<i>Sorry</i>	14 (48.3)	11 (42.3)	NS
<i>Unfortunate</i>	3 (10.4)	5 (19.3)	NS
<i>Regret</i>	1 (3.4)	7 (26.9)	$p = .0001$
<i>Apologise</i>	9 (31)	1 (3.8)	$p = .0001$
Other	2 (6.9)	2 (7.7)	NS
Total	29	26	

Table 6. Distribution of apologising strategies

Strategies for Requests

The stems “*You* + Modal + Verb” and “Modal + *you* + Verb” are quite frequent in the corpus. The senders have also applied other strategies such as the use of an imperative, a focus on the thing required, etc.

Requesting strategies	E-mails (%)	Letters (%)	Chi square test
Explicit requests	46 (58.2)	48 (75)	NS
Requests oriented towards the object	12 (15.2)	3 (4.7)	p = .01
Requests expressing a desire/wish of the sender	8 (10.1)	7 (10.9)	NS
Requests with <i>know</i>	10 (12.7)	2 (3.1)	p = .01
Requests in the form of questions	3 (3.8)	0	p = .05*
Other	0	4 (6.3)	p = .01*
Total	79	64	

Table 7. Distribution of requesting strategies

Strategies for Offers

Offering strategies include mainly promises (“*I am mailing [...]*”), “hypothetical offers”, i.e. offers which contain *if/as soon as*, “advice offers” (“*you can* + VERB”, “*you may feel free to* + VERB”).

Requesting strategies	E-mails (%)	Letters (%)	Chi square test
Explicit requests	46 (58.2)	48 (75)	NS
Requests oriented towards the object	12 (15.2)	3 (4.7)	p = .01
Requests expressing a desire/wish of the sender	8 (10.1)	7 (10.9)	NS
Requests with <i>know</i>	10 (12.7)	2 (3.1)	p = .01
Requests in the form of questions	3 (3.8)	0	p = .05*
Other	0	4 (6.3)	p = .01*
Total	79	64	

Table 8. Distribution of offering strategies.

Discussion

In this part of the paper, each strategy will be analysed quantitatively, qualitatively and contrastively.

The quantitative analysis will interpret the distribution of the routines in e-mails and letters (Tables 5 to 8), as well as the more detailed findings of the original research work on which the paper is based.

The qualitative analysis will discuss several aspects of the strategies: illocutionary force, pragmatic value, function in messages, structural flexibility and degree of politeness associated to the variables.

Finally, the differences between NSE and NNSE in relation to the form of the four conversational routines will be examined. This contrastive part of the analysis will focus essentially on e-mail writing, since the form of the strategies in the corpus of traditional letters indicates that non-native speakers of English had assimilated the linguistic characteristics of this academic discourse genre. Both native and non-native speakers of English produced thanking, apologising, requesting and offering, in ways quite similar in this written form of communication.

Quantitative analysis

For all the categories of thanking strategies identified, the differences between academic e-mails and traditional letters are statistically significant. However, the difference between the corpus of e-mails and conventional letters is particularly salient for the thanking strategies *Thanks* and *Thank you*, as is shown by the value of p which is much inferior to .05 (See: .001; .0091).

Most apologies appear to harbour insignificant discrepancies. The only apologising strategies that seem to present significant statistical differences between the two corpora are the apologies in “regret” ($p = .0001$) and “apologise” ($p = .0001$). Apologies, with “regret” as a stem, are much more frequent in the corpus of conventional letters, whereas apologies with “apologise” as a stem are more frequent in the corpus of e-mails.

Two of the six requesting strategies are statistically insignificant, one is borderline and the remaining ones are statistically significant. Writers of academic e-mails seem to use more “explicit requests” than the writers of conventional letters, although the statistical analysis proves not to be significant.

“Hypothetical offers”, offers where the sender expresses a desire, and “advice offers” appear to be used differently depending on which medium of communication is used by the researchers and these differences are statistically significant.

Qualitative analysis

thank yous

E-mail writers tend to use fewer “full” forms of thanking; showing a preference for “elliptic” forms of thanking (for which *Thanks* and *Thank you* are not modified). In e-mails, 5 thanking expressions –i.e. 7.5% of all the thanking strategies– are “full”, and in the corpus of letters they are 11 –i.e. they represent 20.5% of all the thanking strategies.

In the corpus of e-mails, whilst elliptical forms of *thank yous* are *Thanks* and *Thank you*, the basic form of “full” *thank yous* is as follows:

I/We + thank you

I/We + appreciate

I am/We are + pleased

This might not only reveal the entitlement of the writers to be more economical in e-mails, but also their tendency to perceive the relationship with the recipient in a different way, depending on whether they correspond via e-mail or conventional letter. In addition, the frequency of the stem *Thanks* in e-mails suggests that authors of academic e-mails may be on a more familiar basis than authors of traditional academic letters, since *Thanks* is characteristic of an oral/relaxed style.

The prompts for the thanking responses identified in the e-mails/letters of the corpus give the impression that e-mails are used for transactions which are of a less threatening nature for the recipient. In e-mails, thanking often follows small favours or is symptomatic of politeness, i.e. thanking was quite informal.

“*Thanks for the pictures [...]*” (Message n° 1 of the corpus of e-mails TPF).

“*Thank you for sending me the information [...]*” (Message n° 6 of the corpus of e-mails TPF).

This variation may echo the need for the writers of conventional letters to use more face work techniques, i.e. to protect more their recipient’s faces. In conventional letters the senders seem to use thanking as a means of preserving the balance of their relationship with the correspondent, whereas in e-mails it seems to be used to reinforce the relationship. The relationship between the sender and the recipient may be categorised as more stable, less at risk in e-mails than in conventional letters.

Concerning the structural flexibility of *thank yous* in the corpus, this conversational routine seems to be mostly realised by the conventionalised forms of thanking: *Thanks* and *Thank you*. The conversational routines derived from them are quasi-identical in both corpora. The structural flexibility of thanking in both corpora is comparable.

Most “thanking regarding a message having been sent”, were found in e-mails. The stem of these thanking expressions was: *Thanks/thank you + for your message/e-mail*. This stem

was modified but the variations were limited. Their position in the messages was also fixed, in that those thanking strategies were always found in the opening of messages. Therefore, these “Thanking regarding a message having been sent” seem to be structurally fixed and symptomatic of e-mail writing. Nevertheless, “Thanking regarding a message having been sent” was an already existing and fixed practice in conventional academic letters. In this regard, we may consider that academic e-mail literacy is founded on conventional academic letter literacy, since the writers of e-mails have adapted themselves to an already existing linguistic practice within the genre of the conventional academic letter, which they have extended and adjusted to e-mail writing.

The features considered for the study of the degree of politeness of *thank yous* in the e-mails and traditional letters of the corpus are indirectness and intensification. 38% of thanking is intensified in e-mails against 27.5% in conventional letters, whereas a much higher proportion of thanking is indirect in conventional letters (16.5% of thanking in conventional letters versus 4.5% in e-mails). Adding these percentages in each corpus indicates that the writers modify their *thank yous* to make them more polite in the same proportion. 42.5% of thanking is either intensified or indirect in e-mails, versus 44% in the conventional letters of the corpus. The apparent preference of the writers of e-mails for processes of intensification seems to confirm my previous assumption according to which the language used in academic e-mails tends to be less formal, since intensified thanking is usually more informal than indirect thanking.

Apologies

Sorry, the mostly used apology, is found in almost equal proportions in both the corpus of e-mails and conventional letters. In the corpus of oral English exploited by Aijmer (London Lund Corpus) apologies with *Sorry* as a stem represented 83.7% of the apologies, whereas it represents 48% and 42.5% in the corpus of e-mails and conventional letters respectively in my analysis. This correlates with the fact that the exchanges considered in this study are not only written, but also of an academic/formal nature, which distinguishes them from Aijmer’s corpus of oral English in a major way.

As was observed for thanking, the writers of conventional letters tend to express themselves with “full” apologies rather than “elliptical” apologies (44.5% in the corpus of e-mails versus 77% of the apologies in the corpus of letters). These “full” apologies are those for which the writer takes responsibility for the offence which causes him/her to apologise in the first place. Once more, this suggests that the

writers of conventional letters are more concerned about the stability of their relationship with their recipient, which is noticeable through their language use.

The review of the various categories of apologies identified in the corpus (“apologies for minimal offences”, “apologies for a delay in answering”, “apologies accompanying a threatening act”, “apologies for a potential offence”) indicates that apologies are more trivial in e-mails than conventional letters. In conventional letters, they were used by the writers to announce the rejection of a paper (apologies formulated by editors) or to inform the recipient of his/her incapacity to do something, etc., whereas the sub-corpus of e-mails did not contain any occurrence of such types of apologies.

Like thanking, apologies happen to be structurally fixed in both corpora with a set of 11 conversational routines to realise them. Amongst those conversational routines:

Sorry + I'm/I am sorry to + VERB/
I + be afraid
I + feel badly

Intensified apologies, along with full apologies, contribute towards the analysis of their degree of politeness. Apologies which are either intensified or full in the corpus of e-mails represent 45% of the apologies, and 61.5% of the apologies in the corpus of conventional letters. Again, researchers seem not to resort to overt politeness in e-mails as much as they do in conventional letters.

Requests

In general, despite the heterogeneity of requests in the corpus, requests in conventional letters are more serious than the ones in e-mails, which implies that they are possibly (seen as) more threatening for the recipient's faces. Therefore, these writers need to use more face work techniques in order to preserve the addressee's faces. As a matter of fact, it is unlikely that a conventional letter would be used to realise trivial requests, since technology has made available tools which now seem to be more appropriate for such requests (e.g. e-mail, telephone, etc.). As suggested earlier, requests and offers can potentially be realised by an unlimited amount of strategies. In both corpora studied, requests give way to a substantial amount of conversational routines (in comparison to thanking and apologising), but a relatively small number of strategies is used, as is shown by the study of the fixed quality of requests in the corpus.

To find out more about the latter, I considered the stems which are supposed to produce the most requests:

You + modal + VERB

Modal + *you* + VERB

Despite the assumed greater flexibility of the electronic medium, the writers of e-mails used a relatively small number of the options offered by those two stems. These stems give way to 22 variations in the sub-corpus of e-mails (28% of all requests in this corpus and 48% of explicit requests). In the sub-corpus of conventional letters, these stems represent 17 variations (26.5% of all requests in this corpus and 35.5% of explicit requests). In the two sub-corpora, requests in the interrogative form are very slightly modified by the writers. The simple form “*Could you* + Verb” is used 5 times in the sub-corpus of e-mails and 3 times in the sub-corpus of conventional letters. The analysis of conversational routines, where the requests with “*You* + Modal” as a stem are introduced by “if/whether”, reveals that writers use the same strategies in e-mails and conventional letters. In other words, most of these routines refer to a hypothetical action (e.g.: [John] *would be grateful if you could* + Verb, message n° 22 in the sub-corpus of e-mails FFP). The stem of these expressions in both sub-corpora is therefore:

If/whether + *you* + Modal + Verb preceded by fixed formulas.

These requests are usually conventionalised, since their illocutionary force cannot be derived from their form. The fixed formulas preceding the stem of requests are: *I'll be thankful*, *We would appreciate*, *I/We would be grateful*, *I wonder*, *I am writing to ask*, *I was wondering*. They can be potentially modified, although in the sub-corpus of e-mails these fixed expressions are never modified. In the sub-corpus of letters, *I/We would be grateful* is intensified by “most” 3 times and *We would appreciate* by “greatly” in *We would greatly appreciate if you could* + Verb.

Again, this seems to corroborate my assumptions that writers of academic e-mails are largely dependent on the canonical genre of the conventional letter in the academic environment. Despite the small proportion of implicit requests in the corpus, the recurrence of certain grammatical structures to realise them implies that the writers of e-mails seem to have borrowed structures from the genre of the academic letter.

The elements studied to determine the degree of the politeness of requests in the corpus are the following: tenses, modals, prefaces, elements of mitigation. Most requests are indirect in the corpus. Firstly, “explicit requests” which tend to be highly modified are analysed. In most of them “would” is used. Subordinate sentences in “if” are also used as a face work technique, or as a means to leave the writer with more freedom to comply or not with the request. These subordinate expressions are often preceded by prefaces which can be more or less direct. The least direct ones are: *I/we + would appreciate/like* and *I am writing to ask*. Sometimes writers use *would/could you be so kind/nice as to + Verb*, which is very indirect. It appears that the writers of e-mails have borrowed some expressions from the genre of the conventional letter. Writers of e-mails use very indirect forms of requesting, although it is less frequent than in the corpus of letters. As a consequence, the style of e-mails might be considered as varying between a formal and semi-formal style, whereas the style of conventional letters seems to be continually formal.

Offers

The tendency of the writers of conventional letters to disguise their offers by using other speech acts such as suggesting, advising, etc. further suggests that in conventional letters the writers protect the negative face of their recipient more than in e-mails. The greater proportion of promises in the corpus of e-mails further illustrates this phenomenon. Intrinsically, when one uses a promise, one runs the risk of not keeping it, therefore putting his/her recipient's face in danger. The illocutionary forces of offers in both corpora seem to be similar. Offers are used mainly to promise that a document will be sent, to propose something regarding the publishing of an article, etc. and their usage seems to be rather ritual.

The degree of structural flexibility of “promises” and “hypothetical offers”, (two main categories of offers which represent 74% of the offers in the corpus of conventional letters and 63.5% in the corpus of e-mails), displays interesting variations between the two media of communication. The review of promises in both corpora exhibits regularities, although they are much more numerous in the corpus of e-mails. Their structure is quite fixed considering the fact that only four stems generate the 31 promises of the corpus:

I/we + modal + Verb

I + Verb in the present/future tense

What I might propose is that I + Verb

Passive sentence in the present progressive tense with the modals *will/could*

Hypothetical offers almost all contain a subordinate clause in “if” (e.g.: “*If your co-authors need one, please tell me, I will send you one*”). Usually these offers are organised in three parts although sometimes only two of those parts are in use:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} [If\ you/\ there + Verb], & [(please/just)\ imperative], & [I/we + will/would + Verb] \\ 1 & 2 & 3 \end{array}$$

The above structure is used 8 times out of 10 in the corpus of e-mails and conventional letters, which suggests that they are quite fixed. The hypothetical dimension can also be linked to a time factor. In those cases, the offers contain subordinate clauses introduced by “when” or “as soon” as (e.g.: *When she contacts me, I will let you know*).

Politeness in the offers of the corpus indicates that e-mails are in many ways comparable to conventional letters although the use of *please, I hope you will* and *I would be happy to* in hypothetical offers may suggest that conventional letters are slightly more polite. In summary, offers are quite formal, regardless of the medium utilised.

Contrastive analysis

I will now discuss the differences between the form of the routines written by native and non-native speakers of English in the e-mails and letters of the corpus. This will indicate whether NNSE are more polite than NSE and show, as suggested previously, how competent NNSE are in using e-mail for academic purposes.

With regards to the messages where only *thank yous* are used (and none of the other variables studied here) an interesting pattern arose. These messages are usually short (around five lines) and have a simple communicative goal, and therefore a single illocutionary value (as opposed to the often plural value of utterances). In the corpus of e-mails, only NNSE write e-mails where only *thank yous* are used, whereas in the corpus of conventional letters NSE did so too. This may imply that the researchers for whom English is not their first language and who correspond via e-mail are more influenced by the genre of the conventional academic letter. In the corpus of conventional letters, the degree of politeness of thanking expressions shows that in terms of formality, thanking expressions by NSE and NNSE are comparable.

In the corpus of e-mails, NNSE seem to use more formal patterns of thanking. Indeed, it seems that NSE use thanking which is less modified. The two most indirect thanking

expressions with *Thank you* as a stem are realised by NNSE: “*I would like to thank you once again for providing me with [...]*” (message n° 3 in the sub-corpus of e-mails FFP), “*We would like to thank you very much for your help*” (message n° 4 in the sub-corpus of e-mails FFP).

The distribution of apologies amongst NNSE and NSE both in the corpus of e-mails and conventional letters does not seem to display any significant variations between NSE and NNSE and their corresponding pragmatic competence.

In the corpus of conventional letters, NNSE use the most indirect “explicit requests” (e.g.: “*Would you please be so kind as to acknowledge (...)*”, message 10, corpus of letters TNF). In the corpus of e-mails, NNSE also realise the most indirect “explicit requests” (e.g.: “*We would like to invite you to review one of the papers*”, message 1, corpus of e-mails TNF). A thorough review of the requests shows that more indirect requests are used by NNSE both in the corpus of academic letters and e-mails, but also that NNSE may be more formal than NSE in the corpus of e-mails.

To conclude, in the corpus of e-mails, the most complex hypothetical offers are written by NNSE (e.g.: “*If you would prefer a hardcopy, please send us your preferred snail-mail address and we'll send one along straight away*”, message 1, corpus emails TNF). However, on the whole offers by NNSE and NSE are quite alike, both in the corpus of letters and e-mails.

Conclusion

This comparative study of thanking, apologising, requesting and offering in academic e-mails and conventional letters presented in this paper leads to multiple conclusions regarding the style of a relatively “new” discourse genre –the academic e-mail– and the pragmatic competence of NSE and NNSE within this genre.

The study shows that the register of e-mails is heterogeneous, varying from formal to semi-formal and that the alleged greater informality of academic e-mails is likely to be subjected to restrictions imposed by the academic nature of the correspondence. We may therefore consider that there exists a threshold determining the degree of appropriacy of researchers’ behaviour in their correspondence with colleagues. Beyond this threshold, researchers would run the risk of being impolite, unsuitable, out of place, etc. The greater informality of academic e-mails is therefore relative. Despite the often cited increasing informality caused by the arrival of the Internet, academic e-mails seem to persist as a formal type of correspondence. The conversational routines studied were quite similar in

both e-mails and conventional letters, which suggests that e-mail writing within scientific research is “still” strongly influenced by the genre of the conventional academic letter.

The latter part of the analysis provides evidence that the rules of e-mail writing within the realm of Academia are yet to be assimilated by NNSE. Although the corpus was small, the variation between the form of the variables of NSE and NNSE in the corpus of e-mails was often greater than in the corpus of conventional letters. Furthermore, NNSE in the corpus of e-mails tend to be more formal and indirect than NSE. This greater reliance on the genre of the conventional academic letter on behalf of the NNSE could be attributed not only to the novelty of the medium, but also to the lack inquiry into the conventions prevailing in academic e-mail writing.

In the light of these findings, it appears that the genre of academic e-mail is being formed or that it is semi-formed, and that in e-mails writers envisage their relationship with their interlocutor differently. The pragmatic value and illocutionary force of the variables also confirms that e-mails and conventional letters have distinct uses in scientific research.

The term “digital divide” is now used to point towards the division which exists between certain social groups with regards to their access to new information and communication tools such as the World Wide Web. Such a divide exists between developed and developing countries, since most people using the Internet are situated in the North. There is also a discrepancy between urban and rural areas, etc. Although this can be easily overlooked, it is important to bear in mind that there also exists a digital divide within the academic community, for scholars living in developing countries do not always have access to Internet facilities.

Furthermore, despite the prominence of e-mail writing within the fields of EAP or e-EAP, it is one amongst many e-discourse types within the academic scenery. Another interesting aspect of the influence of the electronic medium on academic writing regards the increasing importance of e-publishing and the fundamental adjustments it entails for scientific research. Finally, although interpersonal communication is the focus of this paper and the approach is primarily linguistic, academic electronic discourse genres carry implications for science at large and the perception and construction of knowledge, which is of interest for researchers within various fields of expertise.

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Appendix

Questionnaire sent to researchers.

- 1) Could you name the three communication mediums that you mostly use for work purposes (the most frequently used one first)?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.

- 2) In your opinion, what have the repercussions of the arrival of Internet and the World Wide Web on scientific research been?
- 3) For which purposes do you use the Internet in your work? (online publishing, video-conferencing, forums, collaborative work, consultation of online specialised reviews, etc.)
- 4) Do you think that Internet could have negative consequences for mankind (delete the wrong answer)?
YES/NO
- 5) If your reply to question 4 is 'yes', could you name some of those negative consequences or alternatively, if your answer to question 4 is 'no' could you name the positive effects of Internet.
- 6) What perspectives do you think Internet could offer to the "developing world" (emerging/emergent countries), more specifically to researchers who work in such countries?
- 7) For which purposes do you use the e-mail for work (arranging the publications of articles with editors, following students, achieving collaborative work, thanking people, etc.)?
- 8) Out of 10 communications that you make for work, how many times do you use the e-mail?
 Less than 1 out of 10.
 At least 1 out of 10.
 At least 3 out of 10.
 At least 5 out of 10.
- 9) For how long have you been using e-mail communication in your work place?
 Less than 1 year.
 Between 1 and 4 years.
 Between 4 and 7 years.
 For more than 7 years.
- 10) How often do open your e-mail box for work purposes?
 More than once a day.
 Once a day.
 Once a week.
 Less than once a week.
- 11) How many correspondents do you have (students excluded)?
 Between 0 and 5.
 Between 5 and 10.
 Between 10 and 20.
 More than 20.
- 12) Do you think that e-mail communication has enhanced collaborative work within your profession?
 Yes. No.