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“Hello and good day to you dear Dr. … 🌠”
Greetings and closings in Supervisors-Supervisees Email Exchanges
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Abstract

Email is nowadays one of the fastest means of communication in academic settings like universities. Despite widespread email usage, lack of netiquette in institutionalised e-mail communication between students and faculty member is noted, in particular between students and their supervisors. Politeness and impoliteness in academic email greetings and closings has yet to receive the attention they deserve. The purpose of the present study is to examine the different norms of openings (greetings, salutations, forms of address) and closings, which Iranian Post-Graduate Students use to communicate with Malaysian academics in the University of Malaya. The result indicates that Iranian students while employing different forms of address pay more attention to greetings rather than closings.

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Keywords: Politeness/Impoliteness, Cross-Cultural Communication, Email, Greetings and Closings.

1. Introduction

Universities all over the world have now started to welcome foreign students. In line with this worldwide phenomenon, an increasing number of Iranian students have come to Malaysia during the past decade. Communication and interaction between Iranians supervisees and Malaysians supervisors is an important factor affecting their relationship and performance. One of the significant ways of interaction among academics and

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students is email exchanges. Today, according to Economou-Kogetidis (2011), students (in this case, supervisees) are encouraged by their supervisors to be in contact via email. In this context, the medium of communication is English which is used as a lingua franca and is not the native language for both the students and the supervisors.

Although email is widely being deployed in academic settings there is still violence of netiquette in institutionalised e-mail communication. Studies on email communication at university level (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007 and Economou-Kogetidis, 2011) have brought up the issue that faculty members are not satisfied with students’ emails since they may contain impolite tone. This happens most probably, because there is neither an exemplary format nor enough instruction available for e-mail writing. Greetings and closings in email are, as in other types of interaction, important factors in maintaining politeness and showing respect towards the addressee as they are the means that may help a person who wants to write an email to build professional and social identity and relationship with the addressee. Waldvogel (2007) explains that a closing is a base for further encounters, which may strengthen the relationship.

Politeness and impoliteness in email communication has been studied by researchers in different countries and from different aspects but email interactions between Malaysian supervisors and Iranian supervisees have as yet to be studied. This research examines how Iranian post-graduate students use email to communicate with Malaysian academics in an institutional setting (University of Malaya). The emphasis is on the Iranian students’ email communication in one university. Therefore the results cannot be overgeneralized (Merrison et al. 2012: 1078).

Indeed, this study is primarily signified by the fact that in the light of politeness and impoliteness research, supervisors and students can have a better understanding of what constitutes polite email messages. Therefore, the results may have implications for the members of this discourse community especially on supervisor-supervisee relationship. Cross-culture communication studies provide us with more insight about the nature of the communication from multi-cultural perspectives and help us to develop a better understanding of why and how people communicate in different ways. Finally, the results of this study may have an impact on the writing performance of ESL/EFL learners when they interact and construct knowledge in their emails, especially in using politeness strategies.

The current research delves into the greetings and closings in email messages and the forms of address that these e-mails include. The emails written by the students were analysed based on a simple count of the different types of greeting or closing to identify the typical format of using greetings, closings and forms of address. Thus, the research questions are:

1. What forms of address do Iranian post-graduate students employ in their e-mails to faculty?
2. What are the openings and closings moves used by Iranian post-graduate students?

In the first part of this paper previous studies on emails are discussed. A description of the methodology used in the study follows. In the findings section, the use of greetings and closings and forms of address by this group of students is described.

2. Literature Review

The presence of politeness markers has been increasingly visible in recent computer-mediated studies on communication and it, as Murray (2000) posits, could leave readers unsure about the illocutionary force of the request. Greetings and closings are considered as politeness markers since they are oriented to the addressee's
face needs and pay attention to the recipient. They help the writer of emails to express distance or warmth, expressions which are crucial in maintaining and constructing relationships.

Kankaanranta (2005) examined messages in English by Swedens and Finns. Her results show that non-native English speakers have a tendency to use salutations specifically with first names. Salutations (greetings), closings, and signatures, as Kankaanranta (2005) declared, can frame messages. She also proclaims that messages may imply a positive tone through the signatures and closings. Bunz and Campbell (2002) found that these politeness markers can easily be detected by the recipients and result in them using the same politeness indicators in their email replies.

Waldvogel (2007) believes that each workplace may have its own way of email writing. This claim has been proved by Gains’ research (1999) who explored email messages among universities and an insurance company. In the insurance company they were reluctant to employ openings (greetings) and used semi-formal style while in universities, they utilized varieties of styles which contained some kind of greeting.

Bjorge (2007) states that in student-professor communication, how the interactants perceive their relationship helps them to decide about greetings and closings and the right form of address. It is obvious that in students-faculty correspondence, the way supervisors perceive the relationship could be different from the way students perceive the same interactions. In the case of greetings, closings, and forms of address, if the choice that students employ is inappropriate, it may lead to violation of social norms and misjudgements. This is even more complicated in the Malaysian context with foreign students and supervisors from various cultural backgrounds but who are all non-native speakers of English.

3. Research Design

Most of the studies on email communication at university level depend on data arising from discourse-completion tests (e.g. Pan, 2012) and authentic e-mail messages have yet to receive the appropriate attention in literature. The current research tries to fill this gap in computer mediated communication studies.

13 Iranian Post-Graduate students who have been working on their thesis or have finished their thesis were asked to send to the researchers their email messages to their supervisors. Each student was asked to send 10 emails which contained requests. From these 10 emails just 7 emails which contained requests for action, information, permission, and feedback were selected for the analysis (adopted from Félix-Brasdefer, 2012). The total number of emails was 91.

The participants of this research study were Iranian postgraduates in the Faculty of Language and Linguistics, University of Malaya. They were fairly proficient in English as they had IELTS certificate (7 Band score). This is an entry requirement for pursuing Higher Education. The supervisors were language teachers. Ethical issues were considered and students were asked to send their consent e-letter. They were informed that their names and other personal information would not be disclosed. The addressees of the emails were eight female supervisors in the University of Malaya. The aim of this study is to obtain empirical evidence on the openings (salutation, greetings and phatic communication) and closings (pre-closings /thanks and complimentary close) used in emails by Iranian post-graduate students to their Malaysian supervisors.

4. Data Analysis

The data analysis is based on a distribution analysis of email textual features of openings, closings and forms of address. The aim of this analysis is to show the preference of non-native speakers of English (in this case
Iranian post-graduate students) with respect to the use of openings (salutation, greetings and phatic communication), closings (pre-closings /thanks and complimentary close) and forms of address. Examples have been anonymized by deleting personal names.

Self-identification/self-introduction which were analysed in Bou-Franch (2011) and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) respectively were ignored in the analysis since both the supervisors and supervisees knew each other. Concrete numbers of the opening and closing occurrences were analysed through quantitative and descriptive analysis.

5. Findings

5.1 Openings

The opening features of the emails that were analysed are forms of address, salutation, greetings and phatic communication. Table 1 illustrates the distributions of these features found in the data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address term</th>
<th>N of emails</th>
<th>Total percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>85</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salutation</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greetings</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phatic communication</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to types of greetings and closings, the current study also analysed data in terms of the form of address used towards the supervisors. The features which were considered were the inclusion of a greeting in the title, presence or absence of the term of deference ‘dear’, the use of incorrect titles, the use of unacceptable combination such as ‘title + FN’, and zero forms of address (adopted from Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). These features were considered as marked and impolite, since they have the ability to cause offense.

The preferred forms of address by Iranian post-graduate students were analysed based on the following categorization adopted from Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011):

(a) The use/omission of ‘dear’, and the use of ‘greeting + form of address.’

(b) The overall preference for a specific construction.

5.1.1 Address terms
In a student-faculty relationship, a failure to employ a suitable form of address is considered as impolite or a breach of social norms and supervisees are supposed to construct more formal emails.

The result shows that 93% of the email messages contained some form of address. Table 2 shows them in more detail. 64% of the respondents addressed their supervisors, with their first name and 19% did not include their first name or last name. Economidou-Kogetidis (2011) declared that ‘Title + first name (F.N)’ is considered as a grammatically unacceptable construction in English. But in a country like Malaysia since Malays do not have last names, the students have no choice but to do this. When Iranians use first name with the address form in the emails with their Malaysian supervisors it shows that they have accommodated to the Malaysian, more specifically, the Malay address form norms since in their own culture, Iranian students always use last or surnames to address their lecturers. Indeed, in Iran last names are used for both supervisors and supervisees and first names of their students are seldom used by lecturers. Students in Iran always use last names or the surname when addressing their supervisors.

Using a supervisors’ first name may reduce the distance. Existence of first name in a message is usually in line with a conversational and informal tone demonstrating a close and friendly relation with the recipient. For instance, one of the students used “Hello and good day to you dear dr + F.N” in the opening of her emails and even included an emoticon which is a sign of love and is a clear cut breeching of the social norm in an academic setting. Such emoticons are usually used in a very close relationship rather than in a supervisor-supervisee communication.

In the entire data, only 7% of email messages did not include forms of address. The most used forms of address are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of address</th>
<th>N of emails</th>
<th>Total percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>professor/ Prof/ Dr. + F.N</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professor/ Prof/ Dr. + no name (N.N)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. + Dr + F.N</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. + DR. + F.N + last name (L.N)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. + L.N</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No forms of address</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary, 85 of the 91 emails analysed (93%) used forms of address while only 6 of the 91 emails (7%) had no forms of address. In Table 2 the highest frequency used address term is ‘Professor/ Prof/ Dr. + F.N’.
5.1.2 Salutation

The term of deference ‘dear’ was omitted in 12% of the email messages, and most emails began with ‘Hi + Dr. + F.N.’ Table 3 shows how the deference term ‘dear’ was used in the openings.

Table 3. Use of deference ‘dear’ in openings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salutation + Forms of address</th>
<th>N of emails</th>
<th>Total percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dear + professor/ Prof/ Dr. + F.N</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear + professor/ Prof/ Dr.+ N.N</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear + Prof. + Dr + F.N</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear Prof. + DR. + F.N + L.N</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>79</strong></td>
<td><strong>88%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data shows that Iranian students tend to use the deference ‘dear’ in their openings (88%) which may be due to the way they were taught in institutions and schools in Iran where ‘Dear Sir ...’ was introduced as a formal opening.

5.1.3. Greetings

Students had tendency to use greetings in three ways:

a) ‘Greetings + address term’

10% of the emails (total 9) included ‘Greetings + address term’. It means that along with the address term students use hi or hello to start their emails.

Examples:

1) Hi + Dr. + F.N
2) Hello + dear + dr + F.N

b) ‘Greetings + Phatic communication’

12% of the emails (total 11) included ‘Greetings + Phatic communication’

Examples:
1) **Hello and hope u r in good health.**
2) **Hi, I hope you've had a nice day so far.**
3) **Hi, How are you?**

c) *Greetings only*
   
   In 6 emails, students used *Hi* at the beginning of their emails and after forms of address.

### 5.1.4 Phatic communication

Within the data, another opening move was analysed which is conversational phatic inquiries related to personal concern and care towards the recipients. 37% of the email messages contained phatic communication, which may be due to the fact that Iranian seldom launch straight into their requests. Examples:

1) **hope u r good**
2) **Hi again and hope everything goes great with you**
3) **Good Night professor, F.N, I hope you are feeling better now.**

7 out of 13 students (53%) have never changed their ways of openings and used a typical form of openings in their emails. For instance, they only used ‘*Dear Dr* or *Dear Prof*’. This was the same for closings where 4 out of 13 students (30%) have chosen the same style of closings in their emails. For example, ‘*Sincerely Yours or warm regards.*’

### 5.2 Closings

The final framing words of messages content is closings which re-establish the interpersonal relationship between the supervisor and supervisees. The data regarding the closings in email were classified into two types:

a) **Pre-closings/ Thanks**

b) **Complimentary close**

Table 4 presents the spread of these two features.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N of e-mails</th>
<th>Value in percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-closings/ Thanks</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complimentary close</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the supervisees (87%) preferred to end the message with a closing. Phrases including “*Regards*” are the most favored closings applied in different forms: “*Regards*” (19%), “*Best regards*” (18%), “*Warmest regards*” (14%), “*Warm regards*” (9%). The second most preferred closing is “*Yours sincerely*” (10%). One of the participants ended her messages to her Malay supervisor with Malay farewell “*Salam*”. It may reveal the fact that the writer of the message accommodates linguistically and tends to respect the addressee by using the recipient’s first language.
Spencer-Oatey (2000) describes request as rapport-sensitive acts which might be considered imposing by the receiver. This could be a reason that students use “Pre-closings/Thanks” so as to mitigate the imposition. 57 emails contained “Pre-closings/Thanks.

Examples:
1) Thank you very much for everything
2) Thanks a million in advance
3) Thanks for your time and consideration
4) I’m looking forward to hearing from you.

6 Conclusion

The results of the study reflect a great variation regarding forms of address employed by Iranian post-graduate students. The findings of the study are the same as that of Bou-Franch (2011) which also found high frequency of occurrence of opening and closing moves. Iranian students used forms of address but not necessarily the formal ones, since they used more first names rather than the surname or last name.

The respondents in this study used more closings as compared to greetings. There were some email messages that might cause offense. These included those without salutation (12%) or address forms (7%). However, in general the Iranian respondents in this study did appear to pay attention to greetings and closings in their emails.

The result of the study seems to suggest that emails composed by Iranian students are formal since 87% of them made use of closings. The great variation in openings and closings styles in the data reveals that there is no common expectation and standards pertaining to the style of writing among the respondents. A wide range of address forms were found in the data which appears to replicate the findings of previous studies (Gains, 1999; Ginenez, 2000). 79 out of 91 emails (88%) have the deference ‘dear’ in openings which is in contrast with the result obtained by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) where 37% of emails contain the deference ‘dear’.

Students should understand that openings and closings have a great influence on the recipients of emails and so should be sensitive to the cultural background of their addressees. The use of the first name in greetings reflects linguistic accommodation by the Iranian post graduate students to Malaysian cultural norms of greetings.

References


Félix-Brasdefer, J. C. (2012). E-mail requests to faculty. *Interlanguage Request Modification, 217*, 87.


