

OPENINGS AND CLOSINGS IN EMAIL REQUESTS AS WRITTEN BY TUNISIANS

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the stylistic choices of a group of Tunisian postgraduate students to open and close emails sent to their professor and examines how they address to him. To carry out this study a corpus of 182 emails requests was collected. The findings reflect a great variation regarding the openings, closings and the modes of address employed by Tunisian postgraduate students. In general, the participants did appear to pay attention to greetings and closings in their emails. The great variation in openings and closings and address forms found reveals that there are no common standards for the writing style of the respondents. Results also reveal a wide stylistic range in the forms of address employed. The great variation of address forms seems to suggest that Tunisian postgraduate students are to some extent unsure about the appropriate term of address to use to address their professor. It is also found that the participants employ both formal and informal openings and closings. The study related these discourse practices to their interpersonal meanings broadly divided into expressions of familiarity, involvement, and closeness - rapport-building actions (positive politeness) and expressions of distance, independence and deference-respect building actions (negative politeness) (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Scollon and Scollon, 1995; Spencer-Oatey, 2000).

KEYWORDS: *Emails, Opening, Closing Address Forms, Politeness*

INTRODUCTION

Email has been widely adopted for both personal and institutional communication because of its high transmission speed (Crystal, 2001). The language of email has received much attention from researchers and many studies have been carried out to examine it. The research on email as a relatively new and widespread medium offers a unique opportunity to study how humans have been adapted to a new form of communication in general and seek to unveil its characteristics.

Since the early days of email, researchers realized that this new medium of communication had new conventions that did not fully belong to spoken or written varieties of language (Foutouhi and Ziayei, 2015). It is argued that emails were a fundamentally new medium with significantly new characteristics that cannot be treated with the old rules alone (Foutouhi and Ziayei, 2015). Indeed, emails have revolutionized personal, business and academic communication (Gupta et al., 2004).

An increasing number of university students who have grown up in the instant messaging culture is found to send email messages to their professors for a variety of purposes (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Email has therefore become an effective and popular alternative means of communication, providing students the convenience to obtain feedback, clarification, and information as soon as they need it (ibid).

However, it is found that native and nonnative speakers are often faced with uncertainties regarding the style and politeness strategies in email interaction (Crystal, 2001; Barron, 2000, 2002, 2003; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006), especially in hierarchical relationships where the power asymmetry needs to be maintained such as between students and their teachers.

Openings, Forms of Address and Closings

Opening salutation/greeting is an important aspect in email communication (Roshid, 2012). Indeed, discursive elements such as opening formulas play important social roles in all types of interactions. It is through the opening stages of any social encounter that the social relation among co-participants is negotiated and established (BouFranch, 2006). Guffey (2010) asserts that beginning an email message with a proper greeting is important because it shows friendliness and indicates the beginning of the interaction.

In addition, the use of address forms in communication plays a crucial role in many societies (Gan and Dumanic, 2015). In many languages, the use of address forms is one of the strategies that are commonly used to maintain relationships (ibid). However, the use of address forms varies from one culture to another. For example in societies where politeness is highly observed, the use of titles or honorifics is an important aspect in an interaction as it shows the social positions of the respective individuals (Kuang et al., 2011, cited in Gan and Dumanic, 2015). For example, in English speaking countries, the use of first name and title such as Mr. Mrs. and Miss appears to be common while in Asian countries, the use of title and kinship terms is also common to express politeness and show respect in communication (Gaudart, 2009, cited in Gan and Dumanic, 2015).

Indeed, when addressing one particular recipient, the email's sender necessarily uses some address forms that may serve his/her communicative purposes. However, how to address the email recipient is often one of the most difficult choices that senders have to make (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Borge (2007, p. 66) states that "in e-mail correspondence choosing the form of address and complementary close will be decided by how the correspondents perceive their relationship". This is also the case in student-professor emails. When choosing an inappropriate form of address, this may cause misjudgments and violates social appropriateness. Indeed, how the participants of the present study perceive the relationship might not be the same as how their professors perceive the same relationship. Therefore, they should be careful how to open and close their emails and how to address their professor. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) maintains that if this issue is a difficult one among native speakers of a language, it becomes even more complex when correspondents from different cultures are involved.

On the other hand, to sign off is the final logical element in email communication. According to Hatch (1992), the sender of an electronic message has to generate a closing. Many linguists have tried to distinguish the elements that made up closings. According to Waldvogel (2007), closings in emails consist of three elements: pre-closing which consists in phatic comments like "Have a nice day," farewell formula and any name sign-off. Heyd (2008, p. 61) asserts that closings can consist of an established greeting, a bare name, or even more unconventional turn-taking signals. According to Wei-Hong Ko et al., (2015), the classification of closings is made up of three moves (pre-closing, farewell, and self-

identification). In addition, “thanks” is considered by Wei-Hong Ko et al., (2015) as a closing strategy when it comes with or without the writers’ name. Furthermore, address information may be added at the end of the email. Address information is considered as the most typical element of a user signature to be automatically attached to the bottom of an email (Heyd, 2008, p. 62). The styles are chosen to close the email messages also represented a diversified spread of forms depending on the degree of formality of the message (Heyd, 2008, p. 62). In the present study, openings, forms of address and closings are examined to detect the chosen style by the participants to address their professor.

Previous Studies Examining Openings, Modes of Address and Closings

According to Heyd (2008), in email communication, the need for an opening address appears to be more or less mandatory (p.59). A number of studies have investigated opening strategies in authentic emails in workplace and academic settings (Bou-Franch, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Eslami, 2013; Formentelli, 2009; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000, 2006; Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch, 2013; Waldvogel, 2007, cited in Wei-Hong Ko et al., 2015).

Gains (1999) examined the openings of a corpus of emails and found that the majority of emails included some form of opening greetings such as ‘Hi/hello’ or ‘Dear’ (ranging from very casual to more formal letter style), although the highest frequency category was for no opening device at all. Gains (1999, p. 85-91) found that 92% of commercial emails and 37% of the academic emails contained no opening. Gains (1999, p.85) explains that the high percentage of opener omission in commercial emails may be due to “a convention for use” of the mailing system.

Bou-Franch’s (2006) examination of opening strategies in thirty requestive emails showed that nearly all emails contained openings, which she further categorized into greetings (89%) and self-identification (70%). In addition, some greeting moves were more informal than others were. Bou-Franch (2011) studied whether the use of openings was affected by initiating and follow-up emails. She found that 95 percent of initiating emails contained openings, which she categorized into greeting (93%) and self-identification (60%). Results also indicated that students mostly oriented to solidarity with their professors, which Bou-Franch (2011) surmised was the influence of increasing emphasis on solidarity between student-faculty communications in Spanish academic context.

Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch’s (2013) examination of the opening sequence in British English and Peninsular Spanish students’ emails indicated that most emails contained at least one opening move, and greeting and self-identification were the two most common components in these email openings. Furthermore, both groups of students orientated themselves toward informality in these openings.

Eslami’s (2013) comparative study of Iranian and American graduate students’ email opening strategies corroborated the influence of cultural factors on strategy use. Overall, according to the literature, the examination of opening sequences in email communication has revealed differences. The causes of these differences may be caused by cultural differences, message sequence (initiating or follow-up email) and language proficiency of the students (Wei-Hong Ko et al., 2015).

Very few studies examined the forms of address employed by students in academic email interactions (Bjorge, 2007; Merrison et al., 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Bjorge (2007) investigated the forms of address and complementary closes of international students’ emails in Norway sent to academic staff. Her study showed that emails were written by students from a high power distance (PD) culture contained a more formal greeting than those from low

power distance cultures. Thus while high PD students favored formal greetings such as ‘Dear Professor/Sir/Madam/Teacher’, ‘Dear Professor + FN + LN’, students from low PD society favored informal greeting such as ‘Dear + FN’, no greeting, ‘hi/hello + FN’ (ibid). Despite this tendency, however, the author concludes that, overall, there is a considerable variation when it comes to the choice of greetings and complementary close in students’ emails (ibid).

Merrison et al., (2012) examined British and Australian students’ requestive emails. They found that the use of formal title occurred more frequently in British students’ data than in the Australian ones, in addition, there was no use of professional titles in the Australian corpus. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) examines the appropriateness of email requests of Greek-Cypriot (NNs of English) university students to their professors and focuses on the degree of directness of their email requests and address forms.

Economidou-Kogetsidis’ (2011) examination of Greek students’ opening strategies in requestive emails showed wide variation in openings, ranging from those which were grammatically incorrect but acceptable to those which could cause offense due to incorrect use of titles (e.g., Mrs. Instead of Dr.). Specifically, she found that students’ omission of deference term “dear”, combined with the incorrect use of title+ first name construction could seriously affect faculty evaluators’ appraisal of the appropriateness of email messages.

Moving to the findings of some studies that examine the closings strategies, Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, p. 83) asserts that email closings from students to faculty may exhibit “a wide stylistic range, from greatly informal to overtly ceremonial”. Wei-Hong Ko, (2015) asserts that the factor that conditions these variations is cultural differences. Another study that analyses the closings of emails written by students to lecturers is the work of Bou-Franch (2006) who found great variation in the closing strategies in her students’ emails corpus. Her findings revealed that all thirty emails contained closings, of which thanking and signature was the most prevalent. Leave-taking (e.g., “see you in class on Monday”), a subcomponent of pre-closing, was also found in the emails.

Bou-Franch’s (2011) study showed that contrary to an emphasis on solidarity in the opening sequences, email senders overwhelmingly opted for deference in their closing sequences. She points out that the emphasis on respect building in the closing sequences could serve to lessen the imposition threat of requestive speech acts. On the other hand, Bjorge (2007) revealed that consistent with opening strategies, students from more authoritative cultures (e.g., Iran, China, Jordan) tended to opt for formal alternatives in their email closings than students from egalitarian cultures (e.g., U.S., Britain).

Additionally, Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch’s (2013) comparison between Peninsular Spanish and British English emails also documented different stylistic conventions for closings. In the Peninsular Spanish data, thanking, leave-taking, and signature comprised almost 90 percent of all closing moves, whereas the most two frequently used moves in British English data were signature and thanking. Furthermore, Eslami (2013) documented cultural differences in closing strategies of Iranian students compared to American ones. She found that Iranian students orientated toward a more formal style of communication and used more thanking, apologizing, farewell and name sign-off in their closing sequences. In the corpus under scrutiny, the openings, forms of address and closings were analyzed in an attempt to account for the preferences of the participants.

METHOD

The analysis of openings and closings is based on the sequence and the move as structural units of analysis. It is assumed that openings and closing sections or sequences contain moves, which are the basic unit of analysis (Bou-Franch, 2011, p. 1775). Sequences are larger units of moves bound together by their topical or functional coherence (Jefferson, 1972; Stubbs, 1983; Herring, 1996 cited in Bou-Franch, 2011, p. 1775). In the present study, the frequency and types of the opening and closing sequences and moves found in the emails are investigated.

The moves of the opening sequences of the collected emails are classified into four moves: greeting, salutation, self-identification and phatic communication. On the other hand, the moves identified in the closing sequences are pre-closing (thanking and/or apologizing), leave-taking and signature. The stylistic choices of address forms are also examined.

RESULTS

Frequency of Occurrence of Opening and Closing Sequences

Results reveal that there is a great tendency on the part of the participants to use opening and closing sequences in their emails. The frequency of occurrence of both opening and closing sequences in the data is high. However, it is important to note that the opening sequences outnumber the closing ones. Previous research on CMC has underlined the optionality of opening and closing sequences and their generalized absence from electronic interactions, which is usually attributed to the informality of the medium (Baron, 1998; Crystal, 2001; Herring, 1996; Maynor, 1994, Yus, 2001). However, openings and closings were pervasive in the data under examination and were the rule rather than the exception. Openings appeared in more than 91% of the emails studied while closings were less frequent, appearing in towards 69% of all emails as shown from table 1 below.

Table 1: The Frequency Distribution of Openings and Closings

Sequences	Frequency Distribution	Sequences	Frequency Distribution
Opening	91.2%	Closings	68.68%
No opening	8.79%	No closings	31.31%

This finding is in contrast to previous research. For example, Waldvogel (2007, p. 7) found that 59% of the emails produced in the educational organization had greetings while only 34% of them contained closings. She also found that 17% of the emails of the manufacturing plant contain greetings and only 10% of them had closings. The present results contrast with those of Waldvogel (2007) in the fact that the number of the existing openings and closings of the corpus under examination is much higher. However, both studies agree on the fact that the number of the opening sequences outnumbers that of closings.

In comparison with the study of Bou-Franch (2011), the present study agrees on the fact that openings and closings are pervasive. Bou-Franch (2011, p. 17) found that openings had an overall representation of over 85% while closings were even more frequent, appearing in 97% of all emails which is not the case in the current study as openings outnumber closings. The present study is in line with Hallajian and David (2014) study in which it is found that 93% of the examined emails contain opening sequences while 87% of them contain closings.

In a study dealing with methodological aspects of cross-cultural pragmatics research, Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch (2013) compared requests from elicited data and from spontaneously generated emails. The electronic data in this

study consisted of emails sent by students to their university lecturers in a British and a Spanish university. Their results reveal that over 77% of the British English emails and 93% of the Peninsular Spanish emails contained opening mechanisms. On the other hand, all of them had closings in both languages.

Therefore, in line with Bou-Franch (2011) and Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch (2013), it is assumed that the pervasiveness of opening and closing sequences was due to the institutional context of communication. Indeed, the pervasiveness of opening and closing sequences in the data under study could be interpreted as resulting from institutional constraints. It is assumed that Tunisian postgraduate students have been previously instructed that they should perform openings and closings when communicating via the medium of email, especially to high-ranking subjects.

Frequency and Types of Opening Moves

Results showed that 95.6% of emails under scrutiny contained some form of opening formulae. A tiny number of emails (8) do not contain openings. To account for the frequency of the opening moves within their sequences may further help to explain results. In her study of Spanish email conversations, Bou-Franch (2011) identified three opening moves which are greeting, self-identification and personal comment. On the other hand, Hallajian and David (2014) identified four opening moves, which are forms of address, salutation, greetings and phatic communication when analyzing Malaysian supervisors-supervisees email exchanges. Inspired by these studies, in the present study the four identified opening moves are greeting, salutation, self-identification and phatic communication. The following table displays the number of occurrence of each opening move and its frequency.

Table 2: The Frequency Distribution of Opening Sequences

Opening Sequences	Number of Occurrence	Frequency
Salutation move	114	62.63%
Greeting move	59	32.41%
Self-identification move	27	14.83%
Phatic communication move	52	28.57%

To analyze the opening moves found within opening sequences, a first step is devoted to determining the frequency of occurrence of each type of opening moves in the data. Table 4.7 illustrates the frequency distributions of these moves (salutation, greetings, phatic communication, and self-identification) found in the data. The most found move is salutation move (62.63%) followed by greeting move (32.41%), phatic communication move (28.57%) and then self-identification move (14.83%).

Salutation Moves

As it can be noted from the findings, the salutation move was the most common used move (62.63%) in the opening sequence in the data followed by the greeting move accounting for 32.41%. This finding partly confirms prior research that revealed a tendency to include a salutation in messages sent to social superiors (Waldvogel, 2002, 2007; Bou-Franch, 2011; Hallajian and David, 2014).

Waldvogel (2002, 2007) explained her findings by reference to the type of workplace where it developed, which she characterized as having a “get down to business straight away” nature. What is worthy to note is that this type of behavior does not apply to the social practices of Tunisian postgraduate students in their emails. They tend to do interpersonal work via the use of salutations and greetings in order to appeal their professor to do their intended requests.

Indeed, the use of salutations and greetings seemed to be a social practice that is rooted in Tunisian cultural traditions. In the Tunisian society, it is a habit to start conversations with salutations and greetings. Thus, it is to be noted that the participants resort to Tunisian cultural norms by using greetings and salutations when initiating their emails.

The preferred forms of address found in the salutation move were analyzed based on the following categorization adopted from Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011):

- The use/omission of dear and the use of greeting +form of address
- The overall preference for a specific construction.

It is evident from the findings that 24.71% of the openings have the construction “dear prof/professor+last name (LN)”, while 14.94% of the openings are in the form of “dear prof/professor”. The next most used salutation construction found in the corpus is “dear sir” accounting for 11.49% of the openings. It is suggested that postgraduate students relied on their institutional learning as they use the construction “dear sir/madam” and “dear+social position+ last name” to address people in higher-ranking positions.

“Dear Mr/sir +LN” is used in 6.32% of the opening formulas. “Dear+professor +Full name” structure is found in five occurrences while “dear supervisor” is used four times. The structures “Dear+ “si”+FN” and “O dear+ Mr/si+ FN” are used twice each one. The least used structure used once is “O dear + Sir” without including the addressee’s first or last name.

Economidou-Kogestidis (2011) declared that Title + first name (FN)is considered as a grammatically unacceptable construction in English. It is found that 4 out of the 174 opening contained grammatically unacceptable construction in their opening sequence such as in “Dear prof Mounir”, “MrMounir” and “SiMounir”. Therefore, in some instances, Tunisian postgraduate students fail to be able to address their supervisor or professor properly.

According to Hallajian and David (2014), in a student-faculty relationship, a failure to employ a suitable form of address is considered as impolite or a breach of social norms since students are supposed to construct more formal emails. These features were considered as marked and impolite since they could cause offense (Hallajian and David, 2014).

The reason behind using a supervisor’ name is probably to reduce the distance. Hence, Tunisian postgraduate students often resort to the use of their professor’s name in order to reduce the social distance between them and their supervisor or professor and mitigate the potential Face Threatening Act (FTA). The existence of the first name in an email is usually in line with a conversational and informal tone demonstrating a close and friendly relation with the recipient (Hallajian and David, 2014).

Furthermore, it is found in the findings that one student included an emoticon “☺” which is a sign of informality and may be considered as a clear-cut breeching of the social norm in an academic setting. Such emotions are usually used in a close relationship rather than in a supervisor-supervisee or professor-student communication. However, it is to be noted that the use of emoticons may serve as just decorative devices as maintained by Roshid (2012).

As it is displayed from data, 3 openings of email messages did not include endearment words such as in “Sir” and “Mr/sir Triki”. These emails began with ‘title + LN’ (e.g. Mr. Triki, Sir Triki) or only social title “Sir”. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2013) considers “Mr” and “Sir” as incorrect academic titles. So, these constructions are considered inappropriate.

Results reveal that postgraduate students tend to use the deference strategy in their openings (11.49%) which may be due to the way they were taught how to address to people in a formal way. As it is clear from the findings, the word “dear” is the most common endearment word found in salutation sequences. Indeed, it is a very common type of showing in-group identity marker in order to express positive politeness. Hence, It is evident from results that the subjects’ salutation moves are influenced by the structures widely taught in Tunisian academic institutions where “dear sir/madam” and “dear”+ social position+ LN is presented as a formal opening. Thus, it is worthy to note that there is a preference for avoidance strategies which was interpreted as an attempt for students to find a neutral compromise between formality (i.e. the use of honorific (HON) or ‘title + last name’) and informality (i.e. the use of the first name (FN)).

When interpreting somewhat similar results, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2013) points out that students felt more at ease in maintaining non-reciprocal use of address forms typical of secondary schools. In her study, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) found that most lecturers in the study were found to favor reciprocal informal address by encouraging the use of FN from students while others were more careful and wanted to underline the necessity of boundaries that signal the different roles in the classroom (p. 193). So, it is important to note that it is up to the emails’ receiver to consider the salutation moves and the terms of address as formal or informal and the way he or she prefers to be addressed by.

To sumup, it is noted from the findings that there is a variation in relation to the forms of address and salutation expressions employed by the participants. Some of the constructions employed were grammatically unacceptable but could not be seen as causing pragmatic infelicities; others were acceptable but too direct and possibly abrupt (e.g. due to the omission of the deference form ‘dear’) or capable of causing offense (due the employment of an incorrect academic title – e.g. ‘Mr.’ instead of ‘Prof.’), while a number of emails included no salutation.

Table 3: The Frequency Distribution of Salutations Moves

Salutation Moves	Number of Occurrence	Percentage
Dear prof/professor	25	13.73
Dear+prof/professor+LN	43	24.71%
Dear+”si”+FN	2	1.14
Dear+professor +Full name	5	2.87
Dear supervisor	4	2.29
Dear sir	20	11.49
dear+ Sir/mr + LN	12	6.59
0 dear+ Mr/si+ FN	2	1.14
0 dear + Sir	1	0.57
Total	114	62.63

Greeting Moves

The greeting moves found in the corpus under study account for 32.41% of the overall opening sequences. The greeting moves are classified into four sub-types of moves: “greeting+address term”, “greetings words only”, “phatic communicative moves” and “self-identification” moves. As it is displayed from the table below, “greeting+address terms” are much more used than greetings words only. The percentage of use of “greeting + address

terms” is 25.27% of the overall opening sequences while the frequency of greetings words only is 7.14%.

The “greeting +address terms” found in the corpus are split down into fifteen structures as shown in the table below. The most preferred structure is “Hi sir” occurs twelve times. Thus, it could be said that the participants seemed to be unsure about the formality of the greeting ‘hello’ and the informality of the greeting ‘hi’. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) describes “hi” construction as less formal but acceptable. However, the construction of “a title + FN” is considered as unacceptable construction (ibid). The Arabic formal word “*Si*” is also found in greeting moves. The constructions including this word found in the corpus are “hi *si*Mounir” and “*ahlas*iMounir”.

The next most favored construction is “Good afternoon/evening+Sir” occurring nine times and “hello sir” occurring eight times. The remaining structures appear either once or twice as it is displayed from table 4.9. Concerning the moves containing greeting words only, it is found that the word “hello” is the most used greeting word accounting for 2.87% followed by “good morning” accounting for 2.29% and then “hi”, good evening and “*assalamoalykom*” accounting for 1.14%, 0.57%, and 0.57% respectively.

In sum, results reveal the students’ overall preference is for informality. Regardless of the employment of ‘dear’ or the inclusion of a greeting, the majority of the forms of address employed made use of the professor’s first name rather than his last name. As it can be seen from the table below, seven of the salutations employ the supervisor’s first name while five of the salutations were phrased with the professor’s last name.

Table 4: Types and Distribution of Greeting Moves

Greeting Moves	Number of Occurrence	Percentage
Greeting +Address Term		
Hi+sir	12	6.89
Hi/hello+Mr+LN	2	1.14
Hi+”Si”+FN	1	0.57
Hello+sir	8	4
Hello+”si”/ mr+FN	2	1.14
Hello dear professor	1	0.57
Good morning+Si+FN	1	0.57
Good afternoon/evening+Sir	9	5.17
Good morning/evening+Mr/prof+LN	2	1.14
Salam/assalamsi +FN	2	1.14
”ahla”+si+FN	1	0.57
Hello Dear Mr+LN	1	0.57
Salam sir/prof	2	1.14
SalutMr	1	0.57
Warm greeting	1	0.57
Total	46	25.27%
Greetings Only		
Hi	2	1.14
Hello	5	2.87
Good morning	4	2.29
Good evening	1	0.57
Assalamoalaykom	1	0.57
Total	13	7.14
Total of Greetings	59	32.41%

Phatic Communicative Greeting Move

Another opening move which is considered in the analysis is the phatic communicative move. The phatic communicative greeting moves are considered as conversational phatic inquiries related to personal concern and care towards the recipients (Hallajian and David, 2014). It is found that 28.57% of emails under scrutiny contained phatic communication, which may be due to the fact that Tunisian postgraduate students seldom launch straight into their requests. The cause behind such behavior is the face-threatening nature of the requestive speech acts. Another reason may be the cultural traditions of Tunisians who start conversations by asking about the interlocutor's health and well-being. The following examples illustrate the use of phatic communication: "Hello sir, I hope you are fine" (Email No 5), "Dear Doctor Triki, I am writing to ask about your health hoping you are in the best conditions." (Email No 8). "Dear professor, how are you especially in the midst of this unprecedented cold snap, fine I hope". (Email no 73).

It is also found that the participants ask their supervisor or professor about his health and also his family's health even though there is a great probability they haven't met them before. Examples: "*SalutMr*, how are you and the family, *inchallahb'khir*". (Email No 26) "Good afternoon sir, how are you and how is your family? I wish you are enjoying the holidays well" (email No 89).

In other samples, the participants express their wishes to their supervisor before presenting their requests. For example: "Dear MrTriki, first of all, *inchallahromthanikmabrouk*" (Email No 15). "Dear professor Triki, warm greetings and happy new year" (Email No. 160). "Dear Prof. Triki, I hope that my message finds you in the best of your health. I'd like also to wish you a happy and blessed *Ramadan*, May Allah accepts from you and from us. Ameen". (Email No 123).

In the latter sample, the email's writer seeks a subtle discursive strategy to trigger the emotion of the reader. The discourse function of such greeting is to trigger the emotion of the reader since it is expected that anyone addressed with this kind of emotional appeal would want to listen or read what the speaker/writer has to say (Chiluwa, 2010). Significantly, the discourse function of this manner of address exploits some religious sentiments and functions as triggering the emotion of the recipient. Thus, the emails writers try to express common sharing in order to express closeness and express positive politeness strategies.

Self-Identification Moves

Another opening move, the self-identification, was found in 27 samples. The major reason why Tunisian postgraduate students use this move is that their supervisor is supervising a high number of students and he may not recognize them unless they remember him of themselves. Another reason is that their email address may consist of an acronym of their names; therefore, unless they self-identify through other means, their supervisor or professor does not know who they are.

By using self-identification moves, the students show an awareness of the restrictions of the technological medium and, in adapting their situation to the medium, they make explicit the type of relationship they have with the receiver. It is noticed from emails under study that some students even though they self-identified themselves in their first email sent to their supervisor or professor i.e., at the beginning of the interaction, they repeat mentioning their identity in subsequent contributions in order to make sure that their professor will remember them.

In the following example, the email's writer exhibits a relatively long chunk of discourse in order to identify herself to her supervisor and refresh his memory.

"I am your student X. You already know me. You were a member of the jury in the defense of my thesis which was under the supervision of Mr. Y. I came to your office and showed you my research proposal of my PhD thesis concerned with the automatic translation: "Verbs of feeling: classification, predication, and translation". You showed your concern and you promised to supervise my work. You asked me to read about the topic in the vacation and prepare a bibliography and a new abstract. Also, you said that the topic is good but if I cannot find a foreign supervisor (cotutelle), we will change it. I hope I refresh your memory and you remember me now" (Email No. 18).

In sum, greeting sequences are used as polite means for creating a comfortable atmosphere for social interaction between the students and their professor. The participants use opening sequences as a form of positive politeness strategies in order to appeal for social relationship, solidarity and smooth communication between them and their addressee. Nevertheless, they are also used to have a favorable outcome for the message.

Types and Frequency of Closing Moves

The final framing words of email messages are closings which may serve to re-establish the interpersonal relationship between the supervisor and supervisees. Closing sequences seemed to be complex and elaborate. In her analysis of Spanish email conversation, Bou-Franch (2011) identified only two closing moves, which are leave-taking move and signature move.

On the other hand, Hallajian and David (2014) identified pre-closing (thanking) moves and complimentary close moves. In the present study, the three identified closing moves showing special relevance to the corpus under scrutiny are pre-closing (thanking and/or apologizing) moves, leave-taking moves and signature moves. As it is attested from the coded data, the signature move is the most used move appearing in 58.79% of the emails examined followed by the leave-taking moves accounting for 52.19% and then the pre-closing move with a percentage of 47.25%.

Signatures

As it is shown from the findings, signatures were the most common closing move in the data. In order to be recognized by their professor, the students insert their name at the bottom of their emails. This finding is in contrast partially with that of Bou-Franch (2011) in which she found that in all unequal conversations, the signature moves were less frequent in emails sent by students, that is, emails sent to superiors contained the lowest number of signatures. Her finding was seen to interact with the high presence of self-identification moves in the same group of emails.

However, in line with Bou-Franch (2011), it is assumed that if students already identified themselves in a detailed way in the opening they probably viewed signatures as redundant and unnecessary. That is why it is found that only around half of the emails contained signature moves. Moreover, it is found that 43 (40.18%) of the signature moves contain only either the first name or the surname while the remaining 59.81% contain the sender's full name.

Leave-taking

The second most used closing move is the leave-taking move, which appears in 52.19% of the studied emails. As it is clear from results, "best regards" is the most used leave-taking expression. In most emails (52.19%), messages end

with a leave-taking move. The most favorite leave taking phrases include the word “regards” such as “best regards”, “kind regards”. The next most used leave taking phrase is “All the best”.

Pre-Closing

Since requests are rapport-sensitive acts (Spencer-Oatey, 2000) and are viewed as imposing on the receiver, requesters were prone to use more pre-closing moves to mitigate and compensate for the imposition. Danet (2002) suggests that informal letters; closings are usually preceded by pre-closings. The same procedure is also followed by the participants when closing their emails.

As it is mentioned it is found that 47.8% of the emails contain pre-closing moves denoting either a thanking speech act and/or apologizing speech act. The thanking speech act is used by the participants to thank their professor for two reasons: time and consideration. This shows that the participants truly express their gratitude to their professor in their thanking closing features since they provide elaborate reasons for their gratitude. While in FtF interaction the request would be immediately followed by a response and then by a thanking move, in email interaction users, aware of the asynchrony underlying the communication, felt the need to thank in advance, thus adapting to the technology used (Bou-Franch, 2011, p. 1778).

Hence, the subjects were relatively careful how to close their emails in order to guarantee that their professor will do their request. It is also clear from the findings that the participants avoid using such formal email closing features as ‘sincerely’ or ‘faithfully’ and prefer to use “best regards” or “all the best”.

DISCUSSIONS AND SUMMARY

The results of the study reflect a great variation regarding openings, forms of address and closings employed by Tunisian postgraduate students. A significant characteristic of the corpus under scrutiny is the heterogeneous realizations of openings and closings. Results emphasize the variability in students’ writing styles when writing emails.

The findings are to some extent similar to those of Bou-Franch (2011) and Hallajian and David (2014) who also found a high frequency of occurrence of opening and closing moves. Indeed, salutations and signatures moves are found to be the most salient opening and closing moves in the corpus under examination.

In general, Tunisian postgraduate students in this study did appear to pay attention to greetings and closings in their emails. 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. Tunisian postgraduate students employ both formal and informal openings and closings. The study related the discourse practices in the opening and closing moves to their interpersonal meanings broadly divided into expressions on the one hand of familiarity, involvement and closeness - rapport-building actions (positive politeness) and on the other hand expressions of distance, independence and deference-respect building actions (negative politeness) (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Scollon and Scollon, 1995; Spencer-Oatey, 2000).

Informal, direct moves such as “Hi sir” found in openings or “cheers” found in closings are analyzed as discourse practices expressing closeness, involvement, and familiarity. In contrast, formal moves such as “Dear Prof Triki”, or “Kind regards” are considered to function as distancing mechanisms oriented towards deference and independence. This to

confirm the previous theories and assumptions such as Brown and Levinson, 1987; Scollon and Scollon, 1995; Bou-Franch, 2011; Hallajian and David, 2014 and Waldvogel, 2007.

As Waldvogel (2007, p. 3) points out that greetings and closings pay attention to the recipient and are oriented to the addressee's face needs, they are considered as politeness markers. Like other politeness markers, they serve an important function in constructing and maintaining relationships (ibid). Greetings and closings enable the writer to express warmth or distance, expressions that are otherwise difficult to do in email, and they are also a strategy for personalizing messages as well as a means of reinforcing status relationships and underlining social expectations (Bou-Franch, 2011).

As it is clear from the findings, the word "dear" is the most common endearment word found in salutation sequences. Indeed, it is a very common type of showing in-group identity marker in order to express positive politeness which is in contrast with the result obtained by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) where only 37% of emails contain the deference word "dear".

The leave-taking move exhibits a marked preference for the expression of distance and respect-building practices in the studied emails. So, the participants tend to show formality in their emails through their closings. The findings reveal that the students' emails exhibit a wide stylistic range in the form of address employed. The great variation of address forms seems to suggest that Tunisian postgraduate students are to some extent unsure about the appropriate terms of address to use to address their professor. There are some email messages in the corpus that might cause offense. These included those without salutation or address forms. It is suggested that Tunisian students should understand that openings and closings have a great influence on the recipients of emails and so should be sensitive to the preferences of their addressee of how being addressed.

As it is displayed from the findings, the avoidance strategy (zero form of address) used and the omission of deference form 'dear' can easily become a source of pragmatic failure in the asymmetrical online communication between the professor and the students. In addition, a typical problem of many emails analyzed was the use of an incorrect academic title, typically the employment of 'Mr.' instead of 'Prof'. The grammatically unacceptable construction of 'title + FN' may also be responsible for pragmatic infelicities. It seems that the participants of the present study, might not be aware of the ungrammaticality of this construction.

The fact that some students use much formal style might have either a positive or a negative effect on the professor depending on the already-established professor/student relationships. For example, if a professor prefers being called by his/her first name and in general establishes informal relationships with the students, over-formality of email opening might make him/her feel as though the email is too polite and thus somewhat imposing. On the other hand, if the professor prefers at least some level of formality, the avoidance of salutations, address terms, and self-introductions might lead the professor to think that the student is not polite enough and is not acknowledging his/her social status as a professor.

It is evident that how postgraduate students perceive their relationship with their professor might not be the same as how the latter perceives the same relationship. Thus, when choosing an inappropriate form of address may cause misjudgments and violates social appropriateness (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). If this issue is a difficult one among native speakers of a language, it becomes even more complex when correspondents from different cultures are involved (ibid).

It is argued that unless students are exposed to recent books that explicitly address email use in academia (e.g., Swales and Feak, 2000), or unless ESL/EFL teachers incorporate email composition into their syllabi, students are left to their own devices in trying to craft a message that is effective as well as status-congruent and polite (Chen, 2006). NNs have to make sociopragmatic choices regarding, for example, openings, forms of address and closings, amount of mitigation strategies and the types of modification strategies (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

Accordingly, this study suggests some useful pedagogical implications. Tunisian EFL learners need to be supplemented with explicit instruction regarding the pragmatics of English and specifically teaching pragmatic issues concerning writing emails. This may be achieved by using authentic materials and more classroom awareness-raising activities (Aribi, 2014). The use of authentic materials in the context of pragmatics instruction is highly recommended as it can highly benefit Tunisian EFL learners to raise their awareness about pragmatic issues such as politeness. Another practical method is to introduce and teach email writing guidelines and etiquettes so that Tunisian students can readily refer to them when writing emails. Teachers can also help students understand academic email etiquettes by explicitly explaining what they expect in the student email. In line with Bolkan and Holmgren (2012), professors may explain email policies or put the email guidelines in their course syllabi.

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