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Using metadiscourse in making persuasive attempts through workplace request emails



Victor Ho*

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on and discusses the way professionals use metadiscourse in an attempt to achieve persuasion through workplace emails. Drawing upon the interpersonal model of metadiscourse, a total of 659 workplace request emails collected from professional contexts in Hong Kong were analyzed. The type and abundance of the various metadiscourse categories used in this computer-mediated communication genre were first identified and then compared with those found in non-computer-mediated ones that also aim to persuade others. The results suggest (1) email offers professionals a convenient channel to persuade colleagues to comply with requests by appealing to rationality, credibility and emotions; (2) persuasive attempts made via email differ from those made via other channels in terms of the pattern of use of metadiscourse; and (3) there may be a preferred pattern of use of persuasive strategies in different moves of the workplace request email genre.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Motivation for the present study

The study is motivated by two phenomena: the popularization of information technology and the development of the world economy. The popularization of information technology plays a key role in professional workplace communication. Computer-mediated communication in the workplace is now dominated by email (Gains, 1999; Hu et al., 2009; Scott and Timmerman, 2005). Professionals are therefore facing new challenges arising from the ever increasing reliance on the email genre for workplace communication – a genre whose linguistics is considerably different from those traditionally used for workplace communication (Evans, 2012; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2006), which thus probably calls for a different set of discursive practices such as the extent to which writers engage with readers. In other words, the choice of genres – traditional workplace genres (e.g. memos, notes, and letters) or the email genre – does not seem to require professionals to adapt the propositional content of communication; it does, however, require them to adapt linguistically to the relational or interpersonal aspect of communication.

The other factor that motivates the present study – the development of the knowledge-based economy – is likely to continue in the foreseeable future, resulting in an increasing demand for an educated, multi-skilled workforce who possess knowledge of a wider scope and greater depth, and can effectively complete complex tasks calling for knowledge and skills of

* Permanent address: AG428, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Hong Kong.

E-mail address: victor.ho@polyu.edu.hk.

more than one discipline or profession. Individuals constituting such a workforce are likely to encounter difficulty while trying to meet the requirements of their professions which are also evolving as a result of the development of the knowledge-based economy. They may not possess the information, knowledge, or skills needed for completing a particular task. It is therefore necessary for individuals to request others for information or action for task completion in the workplace (Osterloh and Frey, 2000; van den Hooff and de Ridder, 2004).

1.2. Requests and request emails

Request as a speech act has been defined in a number of different ways. The present study adapts Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) definition by augmenting it with the one by Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1996) and defines a request as a pre-event act that expresses the email sender's expectation of the recipient with regards to some prospective action required by the workplace circumstances. A request email is defined as an email whose main communicative purpose is to request the recipient to provide information or perform an action for the sender or the organization to which the sender and the recipient belong.

Previous studies interrogating the request email genre in recent decades seems to have paid considerable attention to the interaction between EFL learners and faculty. These studies concerned the use of pragmatic politeness in students' requests emails sent to their faculty, discussing (a) the pragmatic failure demonstrated by the students (Chejnová, 2014; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011); (b) the way the use of politeness could affect faculty's perception of the students' personality (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2016) and of the (im)politeness and (in)appropriateness of the emails (Savić, 2018); and (c) the variety and amount of resources native and non-native English speaking students drew upon when they composed polite email messages, highlighting the need for pedagogical intervention concerning the acquisition of pragmatic politeness (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). The focus on request emails made in an academic setting contrasts with the one in the present study which is request emails made in the professional workplace.

Requesting may be regarded by professionals as a rather routine activity. However, making a request in the workplace should be taken seriously for three reasons: (1) it is a high stake act in that a proper request (in terms of content and language) will more likely lead to request compliance – the requestor would then be able to complete his/her task; (2) the act of request challenges and damages the rapport between the two parties (Spencer-Oatey, 2008); and (3) apart from getting the help needed (receiving the information or getting an action done), a well-constructed request can bring additional benefits to the requestor, for example, desirable personal identities can be constructed and stronger rapport with the requestee can be established (Ho, 2010, 2014). It is therefore important for professionals to have knowledge of the linguistic resources that they can draw upon in writing workplace request emails that are persuasive enough to achieve request compliance without upsetting the harmony between the requestor and the requestee. One important resource that professionals can use to make their workplace emails persuasive is metadiscourse (Section 2 will discuss the concept of metadiscourse in detail).

1.3. Persuasive attempts in workplace request emails

Previous research on the discourse of workplace request emails have identified a number of persuasive strategies used by professionals. For example, Kong (2006) discussed how accounts – types and position (either before or after the request) – could be used by staff occupying different hierarchical ranks in a business organization in persuading colleagues to comply with requests. Gordon and Luke (2012) investigated the strategies school counseling professionals used in making emotional appeals to the email recipients. They argued that frequent repetition of professional jargons and words or concepts presented in previous email messages could create involvement and build rapport with others. A series of studies have been conducted to explore particularly how professionals could increase the chance of request compliance. Ho (2010) studied how leaders increased the persuasiveness of their request email discourse by drawing upon Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Simon's (2004) self-aspect model of identity. It was found that leaders, despite their position power, still needed to make an effort to persuade their subordinates to perform the act requested by constructing desirable personal identities like those of an understanding leader, an accountable leader, and an authoritative leader. Ho (2011), drawing upon the construct of intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992), argued that professionals could convince others to comply with requests made via email by quoting the words of individuals higher up in the organizational hierarchy. Ho (2014) studied the justification for request and concluded that evaluative language could appeal to recipients' emotions (i.e. pathos) as its use would enhance rapport with recipients, thereby increasing the persuasiveness of the justification.

The present study attempts to explore the use of metadiscourse by professionals in writing workplace request emails. In fact, the present paper aims to study the “pragmatics of metadiscourse” in workplace communication, borrowing (with adaptation) the term from Hyland (1998b). The study is guided by two research questions:

1. What is the professionals' metadiscourse use pattern in their persuasive attempts made via workplace request email?
2. How does the pattern of use of metadiscourse differ between the workplace request email genre and other genres that share the same communicative purpose of persuading?

Section 2 below gives a detailed account of the concept of metadiscourse and discusses briefly how the three means of persuasion – logos, ethos, and pathos – can be achieved. Section 3 describes the methods used in collecting and analyzing the

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