Socio-pragmatic influence on opening salutation and closing valediction of British workplace email

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings from a study into the variation of (in)formality of opening salutation and closing valediction in the emails of a group of British professionals. Drawing on both the literature and data used in this research, a number of socio-pragmatic factors were identified for exploration in terms of their influence on the (in)formality of opening and closing formulae. With the use of multivariate regression analysis, 387 emails were examined, 2 discrete models built, and 24 independent variables investigated. Results revealed 13 of the independent variables as significant in terms of their impact upon the (in)formality of opening and closing forms. Greater formality of both opening salutation and closing valediction was driven by external communication, and the social distance between parties. Preference for informality of opening salutation was driven by conversational progression, and the use of politeness markers. Preference for informality of closing valediction was driven by conversational progression, and time elapsed between successive email turns. Contrary to the idea that closing and opening forms constitute optional elements of email composition, the results indicated that such devices were not used as mere skeuomorphs of earlier epistolary communication but served deeper socio-pragmatic concerns.
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1. Introduction

The medium referred to as Electronic mail, e-mail or simply email is sui generis; its function and form set it apart from other modes of business communication that have gone before it and currently exist. Accelerated by developments in digital technology and mobile communication, email has acted as a transformational catalyst in how individuals work and companies operate (Waldvogel, 2002; Argenti, 2006). The literature regarding email is neither a nascent body of research nor without internal contention. Early scholarly work on email, in comparison to other forms of communication, concluded that it was predominantly informal in nature (Maynor, 1994; Yates, 2000) and likely to cause a collapse in the previous strictures of formality present in epistolary forms of business communication (Baron, 2000). Using data taken from the business domain (Gimenez, 2000), faculty level interaction (Li, 2000), as well as student–teacher and personal communication (Crystal, 2001) several leading studies commented on the emergence of a universal language of email. Stylistically this language was characterized by abbreviations, a lack of adherence to traditional grammatical rules, and

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the presence of an informal and friendly style. Such characterisations of the medium claimed that elementary features, such as opening and closing forms, should be regarded as superfluous linguistic options. These features were to be understood as imposing no obligation on email users (Herring, 1996; Sherblom, 1988) and as being largely phatic in nature (Searle, 1984) i.e. empty of content regarding the goal of the actual communicative exchange.

Given the view that people are rarely indifferent to how they are addressed (Tracy and Robles, 2013), it is perhaps of no surprise that recent studies have questioned the extent to which the opening and closing sections of emails should be regarded as simply customary (Lee and Park, 2011; Lee et al., 2012; Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch, 2013). Indeed, subsequent research has exposed the pivotal role played by such linguistic objects in issues of: facework (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003); construction of professional identity (Scheyder, 2003); maintenance of workplace solidarity (Waldvogel, 2007); and, within student–teacher interactions, the execution of politeness strategies (Bjørge, 2007; Chejnová, 2014). Bunz and Campbell (2002), in discussion of personal email, regard opening salutation and closing valediction in email as constituting structural forms of politeness. In their study, emails with both features were regarded as more polite by recipients than those without such features. Kankaanranta (2005), with the use of business email data, discusses opening and closing forms as functioning so as to frame messages as involved and relational. Bou-Franch (2011), using data taken from a university setting, claims email openings present a crucial opportunity for participants to open, maintain or recall social relationships; closings present an opportunity to produce a frictionless termination to a communicative exchange. It is clear that the latter literature neither confirms the disappearance of opening and closing forms nor does it dismiss the importance of such features.

Disagreement, within the academic arena, on issues such as linguistic conventions within the medium seems to be mirrored in more popular realms of culture. Indeed, journalists as well as developers of educational materials have agonized (and entertained readers) on issues such as the use of a formal opening (e.g. 'Dear') versus a relatively more informal opening (e.g. 'hi') as well as the various options email users have to decide between when closing an email in a business context (Morgan, 2011; Searcey, 2011; Adams, 2013). The 'informalization' of discourse (Biber and Finegan, 1989) has witnessed a 'blurring of traditional, binary associations between. . . informality and speech and. . . formality and written discourse. Across an increasing number of CMC contexts, discourse nowadays is said to be characterized by neither one nor the other exclusively. . .' (Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch, 2013:3). Given the uncertainty that can arise during periods of flux and transition, it is perhaps no surprise that how-to-gurus and know-how-guides abound on the subject of email strategic competence (Evans, 2012). The current study attempts to countenance such subjective stylistic proscription present in email manuals and guides concerned with e-etiquette in favor of an exploration of actual language use in a workplace community. It further seeks to add to the small but growing literature concerned with authentic business data.

In the investigation of email opening and closing forms, previous research efforts have generally focused on a small number of variables in great depth. For instance, Bou-Franch (2011) considered 3 main variables: social distance, email length and composition; Waldvogel (2007) considered 4 main variables: company culture, social distance, relative status, and gender. In contrast to previous studies, the present study aimed to explore a more comprehensive list of variables. Furthermore, previous studies have not progressed beyond quantitative descriptive analysis. The present study aimed to utilize statistical modeling techniques in order to understand the impact of the various variables upon (in)formality of opening salutation and closing valediction.

Through the combination of descriptive and statistical analysis the present study primarily aimed to answer the following questions:

(1) What socio-pragmatic factors (if any) influenced the (in)formality of opening salutation and closing valediction?
(2) What normative patterns (if any) concerning the (in)formality of opening salutation and closing valediction were present in the data?

2. Method

2.1. Data

Three weeks, in June 2013, were spent collecting data from a privately owned limited company based in Britain. The company engages in the wholesale and retail of garden furniture and equipment. It employs a staff of 62 full time workers all of whom are native speakers of English. Table 1 displays some of the key characteristics of the senders in the data collected. The data contained emails sent by 53 individual senders. 29 of these were male; 24 female. In terms of seniority 11 were junior staff; 25 mid-level staff; and 17 senior staff. 37 of the senders were internal members of staff i.e. worked directly for the company; 16 belonged to an external organization (e.g. supplier agency).

In terms of donor authorship, an issue on which many email studies are mute, contribution by the donor accounted for 13% of all messages in the data collected. As a very useful benchmark, the study by Waldvogel (2007) involved a situation