



Expressing politeness in the institutional e-mail communications of university students in the Czech Republic



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Abstract

This article addresses e-mail communication between university students and a lecturer in the Czech Republic. A total of 260 e-mail messages that contained a high imposition request for action and were addressed to faculty were analysed. The researcher examined verbal means of expressing politeness in forms of address, opening and closing formulas, degrees of directness and amounts of syntactic, lexical/phrasal and external modification used in the e-mail requests of Czech students to faculty. The focus was on the selection of a politeness strategy. It was observed that students use both direct and conventionally indirect strategies, a great deal of syntactic modification and elaborate external modification. Opening and closing sequences occurred in all of the analysed e-mail. More than half of the students avoided deferential forms of address and used only greetings that could be interpreted as equalising the power asymmetry between interactants. It may be concluded that students generally employ a wide variety of both negative and positive politeness strategies to mitigate their requests. Because negative politeness strategies are expected in an institutional setting, requests using positive politeness strategies can lead to pragmatic failure.

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1. Introduction

In the last twenty years, Czech society has moved towards democratisation and liberalisation. Standard language is enriched by lexemes from foreign languages (mainly English) but also by lexemes from substandard varieties of Czech. Linguistic, stylistic and communicative norms have become looser, especially in computer-mediated communication. The language of new technologies, the Internet, e-mails and chat and discussion forums is quite close to spoken discourse. Communication on the Internet is often symmetric and informal; furthermore, online communication is as real as offline interaction (Locher, 2010:1). In recent years, e-mail has become an official means of communication in public institutions including universities, and e-mail is the most preferred medium for contact between students and their lecturers. Because e-mail functions as an official, written form of discourse addressed to an authority, a formal, epistolary style is expected. However, guidelines for writing e-mails to faculty are not available, and students are often unsure which politeness strategies and language are appropriate. Academic staff members often complain that students choose a higher level of informality than would be preferred by the lecturer (Šmejkalová and Janovec, 2011/2012). Using e-mails as a means of communication has made university teachers more accessible (Inside Higher Ed., 2006).

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Moreover, changes have occurred in relationships with authority figures in general. The Dutch sociologist G. Hofstede evaluates the Czech Republic as a country with rather a high power-distance index (Hofstede, 2001:502; Hofstede et al., 2010:58); the power-distance index is “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 2001:98). In cultures in which a higher power-distance index is found, social relationships are arranged in a hierarchical fashion. Hofstede (2001:107) describes the educational process in high power-distance countries as teacher centred; students treat teachers with respect because the quality of learning depends on the excellence of teachers. Students are more dependent on teachers, and teachers do not expect to be contradicted or criticised. Conversely, low power-distance educational systems are based on teacher-student equality, teaching is student-centred and critical discussion is expected. Although Hofstede’s power index for the Czech Republic is relatively high, Czech authors have arrived at different conclusions showing that the power distance index may have been decreasing over the last two decades (Chejnová, 2009, 2012; Světlík, 2006). There have been changes in the values orientation of the younger generation that influence the teacher-student relationship, which may have become less asymmetric; e.g., students express their opinions and disagreement, they are allowed to evaluate the lecturer’s work and they are allowed to request postponements of their duties. Previous research has shown that differences in the power-distance index affect teacher-student relationships (Bjørge, 2007; Spencer-Oatey, 1997).

A university lecturer is in a position of formal authority arising from his/her affiliation with an institution and his/her professional competence. Teacher–student communication is primarily asymmetric, the students finding themselves in a subordinate position with a considerable distance between the communicants; therefore, deferential behaviour is expected. Nevertheless, university lecturers in the Czech Republic often complain that students’ e-mails lack deference markers (for example, in forms of address) that would be expected in institutional communication (Šmejkalová and Janovec, 2011/2012). In spite of the fact that the topic is widely discussed in academia, the e-mail messages between university students and their lecturers in the Czech Republic have not been previously analysed from a pragmatic point of view.

The present study addresses e-mail communication between the students of the Faculty of Education at Charles University in Prague and one faculty member (their lecturer). The aim of the study is to investigate the lexical and syntactic modifiers that students used to express politeness in high imposition requests for action. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the degree of directness and amount of syntactic, lexical/phrasal and external modification employed in the e-mail requests of Czech students to faculty?
2. What forms of address do Czech students employ in their e-mails to faculty?

To introduce the situation in the Czech Republic, a discussion on politeness is presented in section 2. Section 3 will present a summary of previous research on e-mail communication. Section 4 describes the methodology and procedures. In section 5, quantitative results are presented, and in sections 6 and 7, several tentative conclusions are drawn.

2. Politeness in the Czech Republic

2.1. Language

In the Czech Republic, the private and public spheres differ both in language use and the politeness strategies preferred by the speakers. In the public sphere, negative politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987) are employed, and the Standard Czech language is chosen as a means of communication, which is manifested most significantly on the morphological level (e.g., *s velkými městy* [with big cities] in Standard Czech and *x velkejma městama* in non-standard, which is called Common Czech).¹ In some areas of the Czech Republic, regional dialects are spoken; however, the most widespread non-standard variety is Common Czech. Standard Czech is used in written documents, the media, education and most public speaking. The extreme form of Standard Czech is codified, and in written language (except for some literary works), it appears in its pure form (Neustupný and Nekvapil, 2003). Common Czech is used in informal situations. The use of two levels of language is called diglossia (Nekvapil and Neustupný, 2005). Čmejrková (1996) relates Standard Czech to negative politeness and Common Czech to positive politeness.

2.2. Forms of address and greetings

In the public sphere, Czech speakers frequently use academic titles in forms of address, both in spoken and written discourse. This follows the Austro-Hungarian tradition, the Czech territory having been part of Austro-Hungary until 1918

¹ Czech is an inflectional language, and the morphological categories are expressed by endings.

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