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Little Words That Could Impact One’s Impression on Others
Greetings and Closings in Institutional E-mails

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IN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS, much of the interaction between students and professors occurs face-to-face—in class meetings and during office hours. Computer technology has, however, opened other communication venues in academia for which rules of interaction are less clearly defined, such as electronic mailing lists, discussion boards, chats, and electronic mail. While the former principally serve to enhance information distribution and unconventional course content delivery, e-mail has become a major alternative for students to consult with their professors (Biesenbach-Lucas 2005; Martin, Myers, and Mottet 1999). While Americans in general place value on egalitarianism, relationships between students and faculty in academic institutions are nevertheless hierarchical: Faculty are in the higher-up position, which needs to be appropriately acknowledged in status-congruent ways by students (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1990). E-mail, as a medium where visual and paralinguistic clues between interlocutors are lacking (Lea and Spears 1992), is often perceived as promoting informal language where the politeness requirements of face-to-face interaction do not so stringently apply. However, there is evidence that students in e-mail communication with faculty do attempt to observe relational hierarchies by crafting messages that are status congruent and polite; but the text-only context of e-mail presents linguistic challenges to native speakers (NSs) as well as non-native speakers (NNSs) of English, resulting in a range of linguistic choices that evidence not only status-inappropriate linguistic forms but also new, emerging e-mail conventions (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007).

One aspect in which e-mail writers can signal their understanding of the perceived relationship between themselves and their addressee is in the opening salutation. While the conventional business letter template Dear + name signals appropriate deference when addressing a higher-up, examinations of e-mail greetings have shown that this opening move is not perceived as necessary by many e-mail writers (Gains 1999; Y. Li 2000; Waldvogel 2007). Similarly, closing moves, such as Regards or Sincerely yours, and signatures, while a staple in conventional business letters, are seen
by many e-mail writers as dispensable (Sherblom 1988; Waldvogel 2007), likely be-
cause that information is already included in the from line in the e-mail envelope in-
formation.

Recent investigations into e-mail greetings and closings suggest that they are,
however, important politeness markers (Bunz and Campbell 2002), which set the tone
for subsequent face-to-face and cyberspace interaction (Kankaaranta 2006; Waldvo-
gel 2007) and also reflect e-mail writers’ uncertainty about message greetings and
closings they send (TechScribe 2006). Clearly e-mail writers do need specific advice
on “little words” such as greetings and closings, as is evident in numerous online ref-
erences and blogs on e-mail etiquette (e.g., E-variations in email salutations 2006;
Gaertner-Johnston 2006).

Waldvogel (2007, 1–2) maintains that “the [e-mail] greeting is one means by
which the writer constructs his or her social and professional identity and relation-
ship with the addressee(s). A closing can help consolidate the relationship and estab-
lish a relational basis for future encounters.” However, little research has investigated
the use of greetings and closings in e-mails sent from university students to their pro-
fessors. The student–professor relationship is marked by professors’ higher institu-
tional status over students and by relatively low social distance between them due to
regular face-to-face contact in the classroom. In addition, while some research has
compared student–professor e-mail messages from NSs with those from NNSs within
the context of request speech acts (Biesenbach-Lucas 2005, 2006; Hartford and Bar-
dovi-Harlig 1996), a systematic comparison of NS and NNS e-mail greetings and clos-
ings is missing. The present study examines the impact of faculty’s higher status and
relative social distance on the use of greetings and closings in student–professor e-
mail communication, as it is in students’ best interest to project a positive image of
themselves and to maintain a positive relationship with their professor (Boxer 2002).
The study conducts an analysis of linguistic realizations of greetings and closings and
compares the linguistic patterns used by NS and NNS students. Findings can shed
light on whether the e-mail medium might develop conventions different from those
associated with traditional business letter templates and how this might affect the im-
pressions that students’ e-mail messages leave on faculty recipients.

Background
Background is provided on two relevant research areas: how one’s impression on oth-
ers is formed in online environments and existing research on greetings and closings
in e-mail.

Online Impression Formation
There is evidence that linguistic and paralinguistic choices impact one’s impression
on others in face-to-face encounters (e.g., Bradac 1989). Accents, dialects, and con-
comitant choices of syntax, semantics, and vocabulary lead to positive or negative
evaluations of speakers by their interlocutors. While inappropriate, or nonconven-
tional, linguistic and paralinguistic choices can cause communicative stumbling
blocks and miscommunication in any type of communicative domain among NSs of
English (Boxer 2002), lexical and grammatical selections are often particularly prob-
lematic for NNSs of English and can lead to speakers’ perception as being either rude or far too polite (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1990; Bodman and Eisenstein 1988).

Communication in cyberspace presents yet another communicative hurdle because conventions long established for oral interaction may or may not be transferred to the electronic medium, in which a lack of visible context clues further exacerbates negotiation of self-image (Lea and Spears 1992; Walther 1996). Due to the absence of visible clues, words on the screen convey more than just a message through typographical features, use of upper/lower case letters, punctuation, typing errors, and emoticons—they also leave an impression about the sender, and recipients of online messages are quick to judge not only the sender’s imagined physical appearance but also his or her character (Jacobson 1999; Lea and Spears 1992). In addition, the way in which message content is phrased might be inappropriate given the relationship between message sender and receiver, and in hierarchical relationships, such as employees–supervisors and students–professors, status-incongruence is not likely received positively and can have negative consequences (Boxer 2002; Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1990; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996). In fact, numerous educators have complained about students’ lack of e-mail composing abilities (Inside Higher Ed 2006).

Greetings and closings, those seemingly little words at the beginning and end of letters and e-mail messages, have received little attention from the point of view of how their presence or absence, or their wording, might contribute to impression formation or status congruence. Little words are often particularly troublesome for NNSs of English because instruction typically focuses on broader aspects and grammar structures rather than authentic interaction patterns (Nunan 1999). As a result, NNSs may not be familiar with typical greeting and closing patterns, especially not those in e-mail communication to their professors. However, research on the serial position effect in memory suggests that words at the beginning and the end of a text are more likely to be remembered than text in the middle, and words that are more salient than others are also more easily retained (Healy, Havas, and Parker 2000). One might argue then that, by extension, greetings and closings are also more likely to leave an impression on the recipient, particularly if they are salient due to status-incongruent formulations.

**Greetings and Closings in E-mail**

Greetings and closings have been a frequently examined feature in educational as well as corporate e-mail messages but only recently with intention to explore status (in)congruence. Because both greetings and closings are typically set off from the message body, they are easily identifiable and also easily countable. In an early study on signature files in e-mails of employees of a large organization, Sherblom (1988) found that signature use was influenced by e-mail senders’ position in the organizational hierarchy: Messages sent downward did not contain signatures, but one-third of e-mail messages sent upward did. Even more strikingly, Waldvogel (1999) discovered that more than 90 percent of the hierarchically upward sent e-mails she examined contained closings/sign-off phrases and signatures. Gains (1999) compared e-mail messages sent among employees of an insurance company with those sent among
members of educational institutions (sender–recipient constellations are, however, unclear). Gains found that all e-mail writers generally adhered to conventions of standard English, with conversational features occurring only in the educational e-mails. In addition, Gains observed that 92 percent of the insurance company e-mails and 63 percent of the academic e-mails lacked an opening greeting, but it is unclear how hierarchical relationships might have influenced those choices.

Waldvogel (2007, 6) examined e-mail greetings and closings in an educational organization, more specifically, messages “to and from members of the teaching staff” with a mix in directionality (hierarchically upward and downward). None of the messages examined were sent from students to teaching staff, however. Waldvogel observed that more than half the e-mail messages did not contain any greetings, and those that did typically began with the recipient’s name. Interestingly, greeting words plus name (e.g., Hi/Dear + name) tended to be used if the e-mail “introduced a matter of a fairly delicate matter, made a major request of a higher status person, or expressed appreciation for a major request” (8). With respect to closings, Waldvogel found that two-thirds of the e-mails in the educational institution she examined contained some form of closing, but one-third did not. Another third ended with the sender’s first name, and few messages contained any farewell formula, such as Thanks—used as a “ritual closing formula” (10–11)—and Regards. Waldvogel concludes that greetings and closings were more likely to be included in senders’ e-mails if they were addressing a higher-status person, and thus both greetings and closings are “a way of doing deference or signaling respect and thus constructing the addressee as having status” (12).

Duthler (2006) conducted a study specifically investigating students’ use of politeness features, including greetings and closings, in e-mail and voice mail messages to a faculty member. While he found that address phrases were not more formal in e-mail than in voice mail, he did observe that address phrases in low imposition e-mails were surprisingly more formal (using Dear + title + name) than address phrases in e-mails in which the writer was making a high imposition on the addressee (where Hi without formal name tended to be used). Duthler explains the less formal Hi in high imposition e-mails as students’ strategic tactic to redefine the student–professor relationship in order to bolster feelings of solidarity; however, the messages in Duthler’s study were elicited messages sent to an imaginary faculty member and not authentic messages. As a result, his participants’ selection of greeting and closing formulae was not subject to real-life consequences and real-life impression formation.

Studies on e-mail greetings and closings suggest that there is variability in their use in different organizations and institutions, which is in fact reflected in widely differing advice on e-mail etiquette. Vincent (1999, 12) recommends “us[ing] an appropriate salutation . . . by using the receiver’s name” as well as a detailed signature file. Danet (2001) feels that e-mails should follow a traditional business letter format including both openings and closings. In contrast, Y. Li (2000) assures writers that, in e-mail, “the greetings . . . of telephone calls or daily conversations can all be neglected” (33).

If use of social protocol is problematic and variable for NSs of English, it is no surprise that little words can present an even greater challenge for NNSs, but few stud-
ies have compared NSs’ and NNSs’ use of greetings and closings. In one study, L. Li (2000) found that NNSs used more conventional salutations but fewer closings than NSs in their e-mail messages; however, the institutional context for this research is unclear. In another study, Kankaaranta (2006) examined greetings and closings in the English written e-mail messages among the employees of a Scandinavian organization, but comparisons to messages sent by NSs of English are unavailable. Kankaaranta found that most of the e-mail messages sent within the organization contained greetings, typically consisting of Hello + first name in positive politeness efforts (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987) to maintain good social relations among employees. Closings and signatures also occurred in nearly all messages, partially accounted for by the e-mail writers’ use of preprogrammed signature files. Kankaaranta concludes that the co-occurrence of greetings and closings in e-mail messages “seemed to provide a frame of positive tone for the message” and was “one of the ways to create a feeling of closeness and solidarity in the shared corporate environment” (224).

**Focus of the Present Study and Research Questions**

The present study examines e-mail messages from NS and NNS students sent to one professor at a major American university. It fills a gap in the research on e-mail greetings and closings by going beyond a simple count of presence or absence through examination of different greetings and closings realizations; it also examines closings for existence of closing moves, similar to those found for oral interaction (Bardovi-Harlig et al. 1991). In the student–professor interaction domain, the power dimension is stable, as the professor is in a position of higher status by virtue of the student–professor relationship at American institutions of higher education. As a result, the students’ e-mail messages represent messages sent hierarchically upward and thus make the use of status-congruent linguistic choices necessary (cf. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford’s [1990] research on academic advising sessions). The social distance dimension is relatively stable: Among students and the professor in the present study, face-to-face contact in classes occurred only once a week, but class contact was regular over sixteen weeks of a semester and included occasional face-to-face office hour meetings; thus positive politeness features might not be surprising. The present study also fills the gap on comparative research on NSs and NNSs of English and their attempts at navigating the treacherous waters of e-mail correspondence with faculty, where it is crucial that students leave positive impressions of themselves.

The following research questions guided the study:

- Do university students e-mailing their professor use standard letter writing conventions in e-mail greetings and closings, such as Dear (title + last name) and Sincerely/Regards?
- How are greetings and closings realized linguistically by native and non-native English speakers? Do particular forms emerge as favorites, and are these status congruent?
- Might e-mail communication in academia develop its own conventions for greetings/closings?
Methods: Subjects and Data

The subject pool in the present study consisted of NSs and NNSs of English, all of whom were enrolled in graduate level TESOL courses at a major American university. The NNSs came from Asian backgrounds (Korea, Japan, Taiwan) and had had prior instruction in English in their native countries. They had been accepted into the graduate teacher training program based on their TOEFL scores.

The data consisted of naturalistic e-mail messages sent to one middle-aged female professor, who taught the TESOL courses in which the students were enrolled. Due to ethical and privacy reasons, messages sent to other professors could not be obtained. Students’ e-mail messages were collected over six semesters; students gave consent to the collection of their messages under the provision that no identifying information other than NS and NNS status would be revealed. A total of 375 e-mail messages from NSs and 150 messages from NNSs were analyzed.

The first step in the analysis involved identification of greetings and closings. Greetings, always occurring at the beginning of the e-mail messages, were defined as simple greetings, such as Hello, and salutations, consisting of greetings and/or the addressee’s title and/or name, such as Hello Professor Smith. Closings were defined as those elements that signal the end of the e-mail message, such as a signature (the sender’s name) and any other linguistic/semantic formulae that are not part of the message body and occur near the end of a message. Because analyses of spoken interaction have found preclosing sequences by which speakers signal the end of a conversational exchange (Bardovi-Harlig et al. 1991; Schegloff and Sachs 1973), it was assumed that written e-mail communication might exhibit similar characteristics. The next step in the analysis involved tallying the occurrences of greeting and closing expressions, calculating percentages, and comparing results for NSs and NNSs.

Results and Discussion

Results are discussed with respect to quantitative similarities and qualitative differences that emerged in NS and NNS students’ e-mail messages.

Greetings

A comparison of NSs and NNSs with respect to the proportion of messages with greetings versus messages without greetings reveals that both groups clearly preferred to send messages to their professor that included a greeting (NSs = 87% and NNSs = 93%). Among these, the vast majority were greetings + name salutations (83% and 91%, respectively), allowing both an acknowledgment of greeting and the perceived relationship with the professor recipient.

These findings are in contrast to greetingless e-mails found to be quite frequent in other organizational environments where NSs of English e-mailed each other (Gains 1999; Waldvogel 2007), but the findings are similar to the preponderance of greetings in messages to higher-ups (Waldvogel 1999) and NNSs’ e-mail messages (Kankaaranta 2006). The predominance of greetings in the present study suggests that e-mail composition to a person higher up in the academic institutional hierarchy is influenced by the traditional business letter template (Danet 2001). In a study eliciting e-mail messages from students to an imagined female professor, Duthler (2006)
also found that his student respondents supplied greetings, indicating awareness of and the need for social protocol in student–faculty electronic interaction.

More revealing of differences between NSs and NNSs than a simple count of presence/absence of greetings and salutations is an examination of the actual greeting realizations. Overall, thirty-one different greetings realizations were found, with NSs producing sixteen different variants and NNSs producing nineteen—evidence not only of the enormous variability within the opening move but also of both native and non-native e-mail writers’ uncertainty as to which greeting might be the most acceptable. The great variation in linguistic realization of greetings stems from the multiple possibilities that are created when the different greeting elements are combined: The faculty recipient’s name was prefaced by either Dear, Hello, Hi, a time-of-day acknowledgment (Good evening), or no element; her title was realized as either Dr., Professor, Prof., or Mrs. (which includes abbreviations visible only in writing); her hyphenated last name appeared either in its full form, as one of the two name parts, or was omitted or replaced by her first name (the professor typically introduced herself to students with first name plus second part of her hyphenated last name and did not encourage first name basis with students).

Figures 16.1 and 16.2 depict the three most frequently used greeting/salutation patterns observed for NSs and NNSs, respectively. Despite the range of greeting realizations, most of these did not occur with great frequency; instead, for each group of students (NSs and NNSs), a clear favorite greeting form emerged, which was used in nearly one-third of all messages. In addition, the preferred forms indicate apparent differences between NSs and NNSs, which point to a greater influence of conventional business letter discourse in the mail messages sent by NNS, and an intriguing move toward more bare-bones greetings in the messages sent by NSs.
Nearly one in three NSs chose to address the faculty recipient with Dr. Lucas (i.e., title + last name), a form that omits business letter formalities such as Dear but nevertheless acknowledges the recipient’s institutional status by mentioning the proper academic title. The second most frequently used greeting pattern was Hi Dr. Lucas, which has a slightly more informal tone than Dr. Lucas by combining an informal greeting with a deferential naming practice; it might thus acknowledge the sender’s attempt at building rapport with the professor, whom he or she sees regularly for classes and whom he or she might greet more informally if meeting face-to-face. The title + name combination serves to properly acknowledge the professor’s status in a unique salutation combination, which students might not use if they were writing a conventional letter to their professor. Interestingly, the third most preferred pattern for NSs was not to use any greeting at all; this would most likely not be acceptable for conventional business letters but might signal that certain letter conventions are dispensable, or modifiable, in the e-mail medium (cf. Gains 1999; and Waldvogel 2007, for a high percentage of greetingless e-mails among NSs of English).

In contrast, nearly half the messages sent by NNSs begin with a conventional business letter salutation, Dear, followed by variants of the recipient’s title plus last name, Dr. Lucas or Prof. Lucas (abbreviated form), indicating a heavy reliance on the letter template. In a recent survey on acceptable e-mail greetings and closings (TechScribe 2006), respondents felt that “using ‘Dear’ risked making the sender look older or inexperienced with email” (para. 4), suggesting that e-mail is indeed developing its own unique guidelines and conventions for norms of message creation and that NNSs are not in tune with current e-mail writing practices.

However, the third most frequently used greeting pattern used by NNSs was Prof. Lucas, a deferential title + name pattern that, even without other adornments and for-
malities, properly acknowledges the recipient’s institutional status. Interestingly, NSs students used the title Dr. typically used in U.S. academic culture while NNSs preferred the abbreviated title Prof. The full title Professor was rarely used; apparently, not many students read the advice of e-mail etiquette experts who recommend that Dr. should never be spelled out but that Professor should always be spelled out (Gaertner-Johnston 2006).

**Closings**

Similar to greetings, closings were also found in most of the e-mail messages from both groups of students (NSs = 91% and NNSs = 89%), comparable to previous studies (Sherblom 1988; Waldvogel 1999, 2007). Apparently, presence of both greeting and closing is, at least at present, considered an important element in e-mail messages sent upward in the academic institutional hierarchy. However, what elements signal to the e-mail recipient that the body of the message is coming to an end? In spoken face-to-face interaction, preclosings are initiated by verbal discourse markers such as well and okay and nonverbally by breaking eye contact and glancing at one’s watch (Bardovi-Harlig et al. 1991). Examination of the students’ e-mail messages reveals closing sequences consisting of several elements, which differentiate clearly between NSs and NNSs.

Five moves occurred in a typical sequence in the e-mail messages of both groups of speakers but tended to be used predominantly by the NNSs: (a) a request for the professor’s response (e.g., Please let me know [what/when/if]), which could be a move similar to a preclosing signal; this was followed by (b) an expression of gratitude (e.g., Thank you); then (c) a phatic oral leave-taking expression (e.g., See you in class); (d) a sign-off phrase (e.g., Sincerely); and (e) the student’s name. Differences between NSs and NNSs surfaced in the presence or absence of these moves, as well as in the frequency with which individual moves occurred and the resulting typical message ending. Figure 16.3 indicates that, for both groups of students, the most frequently used

![Figure 16.3 Closing Sequence Moves: Comparison between NSs and NNSs](image)
closings were realized through a variety of different surface structures, which reveal evidence of NNSs’ close borrowing from conventional business letter templates but appear to be evidence of NSs’ development of new e-mail conventions, reflecting that much of their daily communication is confined to writing on a keyboard and screen. In general, NNSs’ message closings were characterized by slightly greater formality, deference, and concerns for phatic expressions, such as Thank you very much, Sincerely, and See you next week; in contrast, NSs tended to opt for a slightly more informal expression of gratitude, Thanks, as the only closing move (except for name), confirming Waldvogel’s (2007) observation that Thanks might indeed be developing into a ritual closing move.

What emerges are two distinct e-mail formats that set NSs apart from NNSs in the former group’s ability to produce brief openings and closings that do not detract from message content but are nevertheless appropriately status congruent given the faculty addressee. The NSs’ truncated use of particularly the closing sequence reflects concerns for message clarity and brevity in e-mail (Biesenbach-Lucas 2006). This combination of status-acknowledging greeting and ritual gratitude expressing closing appears quite appropriate in a hierarchically upward e-mail and could reflect an emerging convention.

The NNSs in the present study use letter template greetings and at the end of their e-mail want to have assurance that their message is responded to; similarly, response requests are often included in business letters to ensure continuation of correspondence. In contrast, phatic leave-taking expressions, such as see you tomorrow, are more typical of oral interaction and informal, personal letters. Their inclusion by NNSs in the e-mails to faculty suggests that NNSs are unaware of blending formal business letter features with oral and informal personal letter attributes. In addition, it appears that NNSs are concerned with establishing and maintaining a positive relationship with the professor by adding phatics as positive politeness features. Further evidence for NNSs’ mismatch of business and personal letter features surfaces in the very conventional sign-off phrase Sincerely yours. The blending of forms reflects NNSs’ uncertainty about e-mailing higher-ups and, as a result, the borrowing from both formal and informal letter templates as well as oral interaction is an attempt at negotiating an appropriate level of solidarity and distance, or positive and negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research
The lack of Dear or Hello in NSs’ e-mail greetings may suggest less formality but not necessarily greater informality or less deference; instead, the title + name greet-
ing is neutral, status appropriate, and professional. The minimal closing sequence—Thanks + name—is short, very matter-of-fact, and reveals no extra attempt at deliberate positive image creation, but it also does not risk leaving a bad impression. In contrast, image creation is more at work in NNSs’ messages through deliberate attempts at including negative and positive politeness features, that is, business letter template greetings and sign-offs, expressions of gratitude, and phatic leave-taking expressions, respectively.

While one can argue that greetings and closings are not what an e-mail message is about—the communicative purpose is expressed in the body of the message—the position of greetings and closings is nevertheless prominent in an e-mail message: They are the first and last words to be read by the recipient. Studies in psychology attest to the fact that items at the beginning and the end of text tend to be better recalled, particularly if they are salient or stand out. An e-mail that contains a status noncongruent (either too informal or overly polite) greeting or closing puts its sender at risk of leaving an unfavorable impression.

In conclusion, the developing convention in institutional e-mails calls for message brevity and neutrality, with minimal but proper status acknowledgment. For educators in the field of English as a second language, it is increasingly necessary to include the composition of appropriate e-mails with appropriate greetings and closings in their teaching syllabi, especially when the NNS students are planning to study at an American university where e-mail communication with faculty is becoming commonplace.

The present study had limitations in that only e-mail from graduate students in a particular field at a particular university, and sent to one faculty recipient, was examined. Future research should compare and examine greetings/closings in the following types of e-mail messages in academic institutional settings:

- Male versus female students, students in different age brackets, graduate versus undergraduate students, students in different fields and at different universities
- NNSs at advanced versus low proficiency levels in English
- Messages addressed to male versus female faculty, younger versus older faculty
- Messages with different communicative purposes (e.g., asking for clarification versus asking for an extension)
- Changes over extended message sequences, as well as over course of student–professor relationships

Conventions change with new communication media, and it takes time for conventions to become established. At present, e-mail writers do not receive clear guidance on message composition, as the varied advice on e-mail etiquette demonstrates (Gaertner-Johnston 2006; Vincent 1999). However, the need to communicate via e-mail exists, and writers need to make lexical, grammatical, and semantic choices. As they are navigating new communicative waters, they are also creating new norms and conventions. The present study suggests that e-mail from students to professors in an academic context is developing toward brevity and ritual formulae that differ from

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conventional business letters but nevertheless adhere to status-appropriate social protocol. Waldvogel’s (2007) conclusion about e-mail greetings and closings in the workplace applies in the present study’s academic context as well: “Greetings and closings [are] a means of reinforcing status relationships and underlining positional expectations” (3). NNS students need a little more help with these little words so that they convey a positive and professional image of themselves in academic e-mails.

REFERENCES


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