

The Language of E-mail in Higher Education in Jordan: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the general patterns, and nonstandard linguistic features of e-mail discourse in higher education in Jordan. Specifically, it attempts to examine how such discursive practices are influenced by sender–receiver relationships. Particularly, the similarities and differences in the discursive practices between academic professionals and students in e-mail communication have been highlighted. Findings of the present study suggest that academic e-mails very much resemble traditional formal letters and memos. As members of the academic circle, both professors and students are expected to engage in discourse professionally. At the same time, the linguistic features of the e-mail messages examined are not only conditioned by the academic setting but also by the specific roles of the sender-receiver. While messages sent to and received by professors are much more uniform in the areas investigated, those sent from student to student exhibit more variation. In particular, nonstandard language including emoticons, unconventional spellings, and reduced capitalization is more commonly found. The occurrence of such features, however, is small in number.

1. Introduction

E-mail has established itself as a dominant channel of interaction for both social and professional purposes. Despite its importance as a communication tool, the influence of professional roles on discursive practices has yet to be thoroughly addressed, especially when e-mail is specifically used between academics, and students in the higher education setting, where English is a second or foreign language.

Of all the forms of electronic communication which have become commonplace in our daily life, e-mail was the first to be widely used and is still one of the most widely used. Since its introduction in 1971 (Baron, 2008), e-mail has firmly established itself as a dominant channel of interaction for both social and professional purposes around the globe. Despite the rapid emergence of other communication technologies such as instant messaging and social networking sites in recent years, e-mail remains one of the most popular online activities, as reflected by the sheer number of global e-mail users and accounts. According to recent figures, two-thirds of people worldwide use e-mail for personal and business-related communication and the number of e-mail accounts worldwide is expected to increase from 3.1 billion in 2011 to over 4.1 billion in 2015 (Radicati Group, 2011). In the United States, mobile users spent more time on e-mail than any other Internet-enabled mobile activity, including social media.

Furthermore, e-mail's vital role in the professional settings, in particular, has been firmly cemented, as e-mail has long replaced the more traditional media such as telephone as the preferred communication channel. In one extreme case where the software giant Microsoft is concerned, it was estimated that 99% of communication within the company took place via e-mail (Baron, 2008). While such corporate affinity with e-mail may sound rather inordinate, it is undeniable that e-mail continues to be indispensable in our personal as well as professional life.

Despite its importance as a communication tool and the growing body of research in computer-mediated communication (CMC), the language of e-mail in professional communication and institutional discourse has yet to be thoroughly examined. In particular, relatively little has been done on the linguistic patterns of e-mail in specific professional settings by specific groups of senders and recipients. The relationship between discursive practices in e-mail messages and sender-receiver roles, on the whole, has not been satisfactorily dealt with. In addition, studies on e-mail and professional communication thus far have mostly been based on data of native speakers and are “western-centric” in general (Bargiela-Chiappini et al., 2003: 86). Few studies of e-mail in professional communication have been undertaken in the Middle East. As such, linguistic studies on the use of e-mail in specific professional settings by second or foreign language users in this geographic location are much needed.

To investigate the specific use of e-mail in higher education and to further understand the discursive practices of third language users of English in the academic setting in the Middle East, the present study examines how the roles of senders influence their discursive practices in e-mail in the University of Jordan. In particular, it focuses on the general discursive patterns, and nonstandard linguistic features of e-mail based on messages sent and received by the researcher during her higher education (master degree MA and philosophy degree PhD).

2. Literature Review

Most recent studies have focused on the positive aspects of e-mail especially in professional communication. Transmitted electronically without temporal or spatial boundaries, e-mail is particularly useful for multinational corporations (Waldvogel, 2007). Particularly, e-mail provides a convenient, cost-effective, and environment-friendly means for multiple parties to communicate and for records to be kept. It thus also serves as “an archiving utility to record information, knowledge and corporate activity” (Gimenez, 2006: 161). E-mail has also the merit of being less obtrusive than face-to-face or telephone conversations and enables users to read, organize, and respond whenever they want. Consequently, e-mail writers have greater control over how a message is planned, composed, and delivered.

In addition, the use of e-mail is not only confined to transactional tasks but can also effectively fulfill phatic and interpersonal functions.

In fact, as pointed out by Biber and Conrad (2009), e-mail is a general register which suits many communicative purposes.

Despite the seeming scarcity of vocal and visual cues displayed on screen, e-mail offers a variety of complementary strategies to convey feelings and to maintain relationships. Apart from the explicit selection of affective and evaluative words, e-mail also makes use of such nonstandard features as emoticons, idiosyncratic spellings, multiple punctuation marks, and capitalization (Biber and Conrad 2009; Crystal 2006). While such linguistic features are not universally observed in all e-mail messages but are suggested to be used mostly by specific discourse communities, notably the younger users (Baron 2008; Crystal 2006), they nonetheless show the expressive potential of e-mail, which is far from the impoverished, deficient mode of communication that was once assumed.

Importantly, the expression of feelings and attitudes is not only found in personal e-mail messages but also in the workplace. Organizational e-mails are found to convey transactional information as well as relational information (Angel and Heslop, 1994). Specifically, e-mail indicates the conscious attempt of writers to signal and maintain, and actively construct, their relationship with message recipients. An important yet overlooked research agenda is therefore concerned with the ways in which different professional groups construct their relationship with others through their e-mail discursive practices.

In recent years, there appears to be a decline in general e-mail use following the rise of newer communication technologies such as instant messaging and social networking sites. This decline, however, is mostly associated with teenagers and personal communication. In professional communication, e-mail use remains solid, as the number of corporate e-mail accounts is expected to increase at a faster pace than personal webmail accounts (Radicati Group, 2011). In addition, there has been a significant increase in mobile e-mail usage, as 43.5 million users in the United States turn to their mobile devices almost every day for e-mail access. Such changing user behaviors and patterns reflect the evolution, and possible merging, of e-mail alongside other communication technologies, thereby shifting its roles and functions in the rapidly developing digital age.

The above desirable qualities associated with e-mail promote it as a popular communication tool in many professional settings, including the education sector, one where e-mail is often used. In examining the e-mail discursive practices in this context, a number of studies take a contrastive perspective, comparing educational e-mails with business e-mails. Gains (1999), for example, examined a corpus of 116 e-mail messages collected from an insurance company and several universities in the United Kingdom. Findings from his study show that e-mails from these distinctive work environments are different both structurally and lexically in terms of key features such as openings and closings. While commercial e-mails in his corpus are largely written in standard business English, academic messages seem to be more linguistically variable and suggest the possible emergence of new genres. Studying the discourse structure and features of university e-mails in Hong Kong, Li (2000) also commented that the styles of opening and closing vary between official e-mails and personal e-mails.

Similarly, Waldvogel (2007) investigated e-mail messages in an educational organization and a manufacturing plant in New Zealand and identified a number of differences between the two workplaces in the frequency and realization of greetings and closings. In particular, messages from the educational organization were found to contain fewer greetings and closings. Such greetings and closings were also more formal in tone (e.g., dear and regards) when compared with those from the manufacturing plant (e.g., hi and cheers), suggesting a less direct and more socially distant workplace culture for the educational institution in question.

Another contrastive perspective taken in research related to educational e-mail is the comparison between native and non-native data. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) studied e-mail requests sent by native and non-native English-speaking graduate students to professors at an American university and found that non-native speakers were less successful in producing pragmatically acceptable e-mail requests.

While a body of research on e-mail in general and on its use in the educational setting in particular provides us with valuable insights into its functions and linguistic forms, very little work has specifically focused on the construction of professional roles and relationships through discursive practices in academic e-mail in

Jordan. This study presents a real attempt to investigate the discursive practices in e-mail by third language users of English in Jordan, analyzing messages not only from students but also their professors. As such, it aims to address the complex interplay between discursive practices and sender roles in e-mail professional communication in higher education. This, in turn, helps us to further explore the extent to which the language of academic e-mail can be generalized and the impact of professional context on discursive practices.

3. Methods

To conduct this study, e-mail messages received by the researcher during her higher education (master degree MA and philosophy degree PhD) were analyzed. Each e-mail message examined is a unit of communication uniquely produced in one single transmission at a particular time, with the researcher as the only or one of the intended recipients. All messages in the inbox were retained, yielding a total of 750 messages.

The analysis of data from one inbox gives an overall picture of the professional e-mail communication that the sender typically engages in. Further, the analysis of the researcher's own inbox enables the first-hand knowledge of the sender profiles and the professional relationships between the senders and the addressees to be fully utilized. To investigate how the general discursive patterns and nonstandard linguistic features of e-mails are influenced by sender-receiver roles, the sender-receiver relationship has been broadly classified into three types: student-student, student-professor, and professor-student.

4. Research Questions

The present study attempts to address the following questions:

1. In terms of nonstandard linguistic features, how do sender roles in the academic setting influence their use?
2. What are the similarities and differences in the discursive practices between academic professionals and students in e-mail communication?

5. Discussion and Results

The total number of email messages analyzed in the present study was 750 which represented the types of sender-receiver relationship in higher education as shown in Table (1) below;

Table (1): Sender-receiver type and the number of messages produced

Sender-receiver type	Number of Messages
Student-student	325 (43.3%)
Student- professor	275(36.6)
Professor-student	150(20%)

Of the 750 messages, around half of them (43.4%) are sent between students. Particularly, they contribute the majority of the messages received (325). Student-professor messages constitute the second largest number of messages (275, 36.6%). However, the number of messages sent from professors to students is the smallest in number among the others (150, 20%). In the specific case of this e-mail account, therefore, e-mail communication is predominantly between students.

The analysis of the body by different sender-receiver groups reveals a certain degree of variability in the discourse structure of the e-mails collected.

On the whole, messages sent from professors to students or vice versa, tend to be more rigid in structure. Since they include many of the structural elements which are present in traditional business letters, including greeting, body, and closing, which often appear in a fixed sequence.

In addition, such academic related e-mails between students and their professors and vice versa are more standardized in format. The main text is in complete sentences and organized in paragraphs. Thus these types of e-mails exhibit strong traces of elements from formal traditional business letters. Generally speaking, the structural rigidity of the messages increases with the number of recipients. Example (1), taken from an e-mail from one of the professors sent to a group of students, illustrates the typical discourse structure of messages in which the four structural elements of greeting, body, closing, and signature are clearly separated by line spacing or paragraphing.

1. *Salam, Everyone,*

Attached is a list of topics that a colleague of mine from the Natural Language Processing Group at the Computer Science Department is interested in getting students to work on. He is eager to get PhD students to do their theses on these topics because they will contribute to his endeavor to serve the Quran and the Arabic language. If any of you is interested, please contact me to arrange a meeting for you with him.

Best Wishes,

(the name of the professor)

Student-student messages, on the other hand, display a higher level of diversity in discourse structure. Colleagues' messages contain elements found in traditional business letters. Others are more loosely structured in the sense that line spacing and paragraphing is absent, and contain weaker traces of elements of formal letters.

Example (2) is a message sent from one student to her colleague, in which the closing is absent.

2. *Dear colleague,*

Please fill the form that I have attached to you for a research I am working on.

Even if structural elements are present, they are sometimes not segmented by paragraphs, sentence breaks, or punctuation marks, as illustrated in example (3) where the main text is presented as a string of unbroken text. Combined with some informal features such as contraction and the reduced use of capitalization, such structural integration may suggest the presence of elements from a newer text messaging where line spacing and punctuation marks are frequently omitted.

3. *thx honey...you got mine or notNice time sweetie*

Greetings and closings, which are considered the most salient structural features of e-mail are further analyzed in order to better understand the discourse structure of the messages. Table 2 shows the distribution of messages without greetings by sender-receiver type.

Table (2): the distribution of e-mail messages without greeting by sender-receiver type

Sender-receiver type	Number/ percentage
Student-student	168 (51.6%)
Student- professor	6(2.1%)
Professor-student	15(10%)
Total	189(25.2%)

Generally speaking, Table (2) shows that messages without greetings are a minority (around 25%) in the e-mails studied. However, most of e-mails without greetings are sent between students (around 52%). This in turn could be due to the informality of such type of messages. On the contrary, most of the messages sent from professors to student or vice versa contained a greeting due to the formality of such types of relationships. Messages with no greeting tend to be mostly replied messages. Especially that, replied messages are unlikely to begin with a greeting, since they represent responses to previous messages.

Like greetings, closings achieve important social functions. As remarked by Waldvogel (2007), closings play a role in strengthening the relationship between the message sender and the addressee(s) and help provide an interpersonal basis for future correspondence. Table (3) shows the distribution of messages without closings by sender type in the present study.

Table (3): the distribution of e-mail messages without closing by sender-receiver type

Sender-receiver type	Number/ percentage
Student-student	237 (72.9%)
Student- professor	15(5.4%)
Professor-student	9(6%)
Total	261(34.8%)

Unlike the messages without greetings which are rarely found in the data, messages without closing are commonly found and constitute around (35%) of the total number of e-mails analyzed. However, there are quantitative differences between the three sender-receiver types in terms of the use of closings. The percentage of student-student messages without closings is extremely high (around 73%). However, the messages without closing constitute a small portion (student-professor (around 5%) and professor-student (6%)). This partly explains the relatively shorter length of student-student messages. Given that closings are suggested to signal deference or respect to the recipients in formal relationships (Waldvogel, 2007) and academics are generally considered to have a higher status institutionally than students.

Thus the present study points to the gradual establishment of the structural conventions of e-mail. As remarked by Crystal (2006), it takes time for the language of any Internet output to settle down, and e-mail is no exception. Messages without greetings and closings are now in a small minority, as e-mail has evolved over the years to establish a more rigid structure which displays a high level of similarity with traditional business letters, with greetings and closings as almost obligatory components in academic communication.

Nonstandard linguistic features, on the other hand, refer to those not taught nor typically used in the educational settings and in other formal domains. Generally recognized as an indication of informality, nonstandard features include emoticons, irregular spellings, paralinguistic cues, unconventional abbreviations, and the omission or multiple uses of punctuation marks (Crystal 2006), which are often examined in e-mail-related and other CMC studies.

On the whole, messages from the three types of sender-receiver relationship are mostly written in Standard English, conforming to the linguistic patterns generally observed in formal business writing. In contrast, students-student messages are much more variable. While some are similar to those sent from professors to students and vice versa in the sense that they are formal in tone and mostly contain typical features of standard written English, others make use of less conventional features. Table (4) compares the use of the nonstandard linguistic features found in the present study.

Table (4): The use of nonstandard linguistic features by sender-receiver type

Sender-receiver type	Emoticons	Irregular Spelling	Reduced use of capitalization
Student-student	10(3%)	102(31.3%)	93(28.6%)
Student- professor	0	0	6(2.1%)
Professor-student	0	0	0
Total	10(1.3%)	30(4%)	93(12.4%)

Table (4) shows a noticeable difference between student-professor, professor-student messages and student-student messages in the use of such nonstandard features. Generally, the use of emoticons and other nonlinguistic features are largely negligible in the messages sent to or received by professors (professor-student and student-professor types) across the academic messages. E-mails from students, in general, are much more likely to contain traces of unconventionality. The students' use of emoticons tends to be restricted only to the use of variants of the smiley emoticon and to one-to-one correspondence between individuals with close contact. This suggests that most people in higher education in the present study still avoid the use of emoticons in the academic setting, this in turn supports Angell and Heslop (1994: 111) view who remarked that emoticons are "the equivalent of e-mail slang and should not be used in formal e-mail messages."

4. *Dear colleagues,*

Please reply with anything so I know you got this

Good luck :)

Likewise, the use of irregular spellings shows a discrepancy between messages sent by professors and students. As table (4) shows, messages sent to or received by professors do not include irregular spellings. Among students, in contrast, the practice of using nonstandard spellings is more widespread (around 31%). The most typical example is the second-person pronoun 'you', which is often simplified as 'u'. Other examples include 'ur' for the word 'your', 'Thx' for 'thanks', and 'ASAP' for 'As Soon As Possible'.

Regarding the reduced use of capitalization, there is an even greater difference between the messages of the three types of relations. Only a minimal percentage of e-mails sent from students to professors use small letters in occasions traditionally expected to be capitalized (2%). These include the sentence-initial position, the first-person pronoun I, and proper names. In messages sent from professors to students, this feature is not even found. In comparison, a much higher percentage of student-student e-mails employ small letters when capitalization is normally anticipated (29%).

It should be noted that while such nonstandard behaviors are exclusive to student-student interactions in the messages studied, they only represent a small minority of the total number of e-mails from students and a tiny minority of all messages. In most students' messages, such nonstandard features are absent. This is contrary to the popular beliefs that online texts produced by young people are filled with such features. These findings also indicate students' awareness of the particular linguistic demands arising from academic communication, when they are addressing their professors but not their peers.

The findings of the present study partly contradict the common view that such nonstandard linguistic features are one of the most salient elements of CMC discourse. In the present study of academic e-mail communication, at least, such features occur rather rarely, suggesting a reasonably high level of formality associated with these types of interactions.

6. Conclusion

Findings of the present study suggest that academic e-mails very much resemble traditional formal letters and memos. As members of the academic circle, both professors and students are expected to engage in discourse professionally.

At the same time, the linguistic features of the e-mail messages examined are not only conditioned by the academic setting but also by the specific roles of the sender-receiver. While messages sent to and received by professors are much more uniform in the areas investigated, those sent from student to student exhibit more variation. In particular, nonstandard language including emoticons, unconventional spellings, and reduced capitalization is more commonly found. The occurrence of such features, however small in number, suggests that students' e-mails bear a stronger resemblance to what has been frequently observed in chatting and instant messaging which favor these nonstandard features.

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