Hyper-formality and Ultra-casualness: Native and Non-native English Style on the Ask-A-Linguist Web-based Bulletin Board

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Die Studie diskutiert quantitative und qualitative Unterschiede der englischsprachigen Anfragen an Ask-a-Linguist, die von Muttersprachlern und Nicht-Muttersprachlern formuliert wurden. Die Untersuchungen konzentrieren sich dabei in erster Linie auf die Formalität bzw. Informalität und die Verwendung von Höflichkeitsformen in diesem asynchronen Forum. Insgesamt machen die Fragesteller von einer ganzen Spannbreite linguistischer Formalitäten Gebrauch, und verwenden sowohl "überformelle" als auch "überinformelle" Anfragen, um sich in diesem durch stilistische Vagheit gekennzeichneten Forum zurecht zu finden. Dabei sind bemerkbare Unterschiede zwischen Muttersprachlern und Nichtmuttersprachlern festzustellen, insbesondere in Bezug auf die verwendeten Höflichkeitsstrategien, die bei Anfragen, Dankesbezeugungen, sowie Begrüssungen und Verabschiedungen angewendet werden. Die Ergebnisse der Untersuchung veranschaulichen ausserdem die Komplexität der stilistischen bzw. pragmatischen Mechanismen, die Nichtmuttersprachler des Englischen verwenden, wenn sie sich in dem relativ unpersönlichen und informellen Forum bewegen.

Stichwörter:
E-Mail, Internet, Höflichkeit, Fremdsprache, Stil

1. Introduction

The stylistic struggle between formality and casualness in language in general, but in email in particular, has been the subject of much recent academic discussion (Cho, forthcoming; Rowe, 1995; Rowe, in press; Rowe, 2007; Danet, 2002 and 2001; Rowe, 2000; Baron, 1998 and 1984; Herring, 1996; Ferrara *et al.*, 1991). All point out that email is more akin to speaking than to writing-which falls in line with Chafe (1985), who had already shown that most forms of spoken language tend to be more informal in structure than are most forms of written language. Rowe, 1995 and Herring, 1996 expressly point out email's "casualising" effects (Rowe, 1995, 2007) and overall informality effects (Herring, 1996). Similarly, Rowe (2001: 82; Rowe, in press) regards email as the electronic parallel to the handwritten note. Danet speaks of formality issues (and indeed, norm issues) in "public" email style (2001: 63ff), and shows that uncertainty as to "appropriate" email form may lead to hyper-formality (Danet, 2001: 54-55).

Furthermore, computer-mediated communication in general has, especially in its inception, been strongly characterized by stylistically casual "insider" linguistic structures-many having originated for the purpose of time and key-stroke efficiency, others as a replacement for paralinguistic cues absent in

written interaction, and still others having been created primarily for fun, pleasure, and group solidarity. Moreover, stylistic norms in the various sub-media (bulletin- and message boards, email, webchat IM, SMS, MUDs, etc.) are ever evolving.

English seems to have become to a large extent the lingua franca of computer-mediated communication, at least as far as international web-interfaced bulletin boards are concerned; and it may take outsiders-particularly non-native speakers of English-months or more in some cases to master the intricacies of English-based electronic communication. One area which is particularly affected is the level of stylistic formality and politeness. The purpose of the current study is to demonstrate some qualitative (stylistic, pragmatic, and semantic) and quantitative differences in (in)formality and politeness strategies between native and non-native speakers of English in a query-oriented bulletin board forum.

2.   Key Concepts

In traditional written communication (e.g. "snail-mailed" hard-copy letters, memos, etc.), the appropriate stylistic level is assumed to be formal, and standard form is easily mastered with the aid of basic style manuals and the like. However, email has been widely recognized as offering a more casual venue of communication, even with business correspondence (these issues are addressed in Cho, forthcoming; Danet, 2001; Rowe, 2000; Baron, 1998 and 1984; and others). Furthermore, because more and more crossover venues-asynchronous virtual fora and electronic bulletin boards, for example-have no truly parallel domain outside of electronic communication, an appropriate definitive electronic style is not easily arrived at. It does, however, appear to be the case that the language used on professional lists is more likely to show politeness than some other public fora (Herring, 2001), more civil, for example, than the language of messages on news website bulletin boards etc. For example, this posting under the Extreme Politics chat section on www.msnbc.com seems particularly impolite by most standards of "netiquette":

(i)

> Lets discuss one thing at a time,pp
>
> Reiterate the top statement, there are too many errors, so get back to me- hell!, I may even agree with you on some points.
>
> BTW, don't bother with this silly political correctness thing (guy/gal), person rather than man usage crap.

As contrasted with this closing portion of posting on a recent discussion on the LINGUIST List (www.linguistlist.org), parent organisation of Ask-A-Linguist :

(ii)

> To conclude, although some might fail to see it, all academic boycotts are most dangerous but some are even more dangerous than others.
>
> With very best wishes to all of you - independently of your race, religion, country, institution or political party...,

While both postings express a firm difference of opinion with a previous poster, the second one is distinctly more polite than the first. Nevertheless, impolite postings such as the first one are tolerated by the Extreme Politics user community.

The general communities of bulletin board users loosely establish their own standards along the way (reflected, e.g., in Hale, 1996 and in the above examples). The linguistic subtleties required for stylistically and pragmatically appropriate expression in these ill-defined venues are not easily mastered by non-native speakers of English, where English is commonly the language of communication in international bulletin board fora.

2.1   Formality and politeness

Stylistic formality is understood both in terms of linguistic form (phonetics, morphology, syntax, lexis, etc.) and politeness strategies (pragmatics). In written language, then, stylistic formality entails communication "rules" such as adhering to prescriptive grammatical norms and standard orthography, and using elevated (i.e., non-dialectal, non-slang, and non-spoken-linked) lexis. It also entails adhering to cultural "politeness rules" appropriate both to the social context and to the communication medium.

Politeness is part of pragmatic competence. To be fully proficient in a foreign language, learners must also master the nuances of politeness strategies, particularly as these correspond to specific social contexts. It is apparent how complicated this task is, given that native speakers also occasionally make errors of this type, which lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications. For L2 learners the situation is even more complex, because they come to the L2 communication event with their own set of cultural politeness norms, and there is much indication (e.g. Rintell, 1981: 31; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, as well as in the current study) that there is a great deal of positive transfer when L2 speakers invoke politeness strategies in communication. For example, Rintell *et al.* found that native Spanish speakers transferred the frequency context for *por favor* to the context for English *please*, which has a more restricted usage in native speaker English. Kasper and Blum-Kulka found that positive transfer of politeness devices occurs even at very high levels of L2 proficiency.

Much of politeness theory centers on the notion of 'face' as described by Brown and Levinson (1974, 1978, 1987). They identify two types of 'face': *positive face* and *negative face*, with their corresponding face-saving strategies *positive politeness* and *negative politeness*. Achieving positive politeness means invoking strategies that satisfy the speaker's need for solidarity, belongingness, approval, and the like. Positive politeness often takes the form of (i) small-talk (Brown & Levinson, 1978), greetings (Scarcella & Brunak, 1981: 62), and other linguistic techniques that show interest in the addressee (Brown & Levinson, 1978), and (ii) in-group or informal language (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Achieving negative politeness means invoking strategies that reduce the effect of an imposition on the addressee. Negative politeness often takes the form of (i) hedging and indirectness, and (ii) deferential address forms. Deference is generally achieved when the speaker conveys appreciation (gives appropriate status) to the addressee (Goffman, 1971: 56; Fraser & Nolen, 1981: 103).

There are clearly separate formality and politeness rules in operation within and across different genres and in different social situations. Typically, more formality is expected in the business and professional situation than what is called for in more familiar contexts (e.g. at home, in a bar, with friends, etc.). Strategies which would at face value seem "polite" may be impolite in the wrong context, for example, if an employee is on a first-name basis with the employer, it would likely seem rude, or at least ironic, to suddenly begin calling the employer "Ms./Mr. XYZ".

Spoken communication, overall, tends to be less formal than written communication (Chafe, 1985), and telephonic communication is typically more normed than face-to-face communication (see Millar, in press), given the absence of paralinguistic cues over telephone. For example, a smile cannot constitute a greeting on the telephone; proper etiquette suggests that the "pre-addressee" offer a generic 'hello' first upon answering the phone, after having heard the ring which announced the incoming call. Written communication in the professional environment-usually in the form of "hard-copy" letters and memos, faxes, and email-tends to be more formal than familiar written correspondence, and more formal than most ordinary forms of oral communi-cation (i.e., excepting speeches, formal addresses, etc.). Of these professional written communication media, email appears to be the most casual.

Nevertheless, professional email, unlike familiar email, does have certain norms which users expect each other to adhere to. These usually include a greeting, message body, closing, and signature. Within each of these elements, a certain level of stylistic formality is generally expected, particularly when the interlocutors do not know each other at all, when there is not a great deal of familiarity, or when there is a difference in status or hierarchy. It is

precisely in these areas where non-native speakers of English often exhibit (iii) "hyper-formal" or (iv) "ultra-casual" stylistic behaviour:

(iii)

> Dear [XYZ],
>
> My apologies for being late for replying to your very valuable and helpful mail. […]
> Your comments on "be+dying" constructions have enabled me to think of the constructions in a clear way. […] Last but not least, thank you very much for your very helpful comments.
>
> Sincerely yours,
>
> [ABC]

(iv)

> nice hearing from you. but the qusetions u can answer are they limited to Linguistics aspects alone? Cos i'm a university student […] pls mail me back and let me know. Nice heraing from u anyway.
> [jkl]

3.   Method

As data for the study, I have used queries and responses sent to Ask-A-Linguist. Ask-A-Linguist, affiliate of the LINGUIST list, is a web-based email bulletin board service which "is designed to be a place where anyone interested in language or linguistics can ask a question and get the response of a panel of professional linguists" (http://www.linguistlist.org/~ask-ling/). To post a query, a layperson fills in a web form and submits it online:

Question Submission Form

If you fill out the form below, your question will be forwarded to the panel of linguists who have volunteered to staff Ask-A-Linguist. One or more of them will answer you via email. In due course, both the question and response(s) will be displayed on the LINGUIST web site.

Your   Name:

Your   E-mail   address:

What is your question about?:

Type your question here

Send Question   Reset

Fig. 1: Ask-A-Linguist question submission form

The software that drives the form then automatically emails the query simultaneously to all members of the panel in listserv fashion. As individuals from the panel reply to the query, their replies arrive in the querier's email inbox individually; the panellist replies are simultaneously automatically posted to the Ask-A-Linguist web bulletin board in threaded fashion.

The advantage to using data from the Ask-A-Linguist forum is that certain constants can be held, e.g.:

1. Order of initiation. The querier always initiates the interaction. If the querier is pro-active, this reduces the extent to which the querier is in a position to imitate the norms of native-speaker panelist respondents.

2. Pragmatic intention. The querier's goal in the initial contact is always to make a request for information. There are certain, specific linguistic strategies associated with requests.

3. Querier-respondent "rank". The querier is almost always a non-linguist, or linguist-in-training, soliciting advice from the panel of professionals in the field of linguistics. Socially, experts hold "higher status" than non-experts in a relevant interaction, particularly in Asian cultures.

4. Mode of communication. Ask-A-Linguist communications are always conducted via email. Email has already been shown (Rowe, 1995, 2001, 2007; Rowe, in press; Rowe, forthcoming; Cho, forthcoming) to introduce certain technological and social conditions that users react to in specific ways. Moreover, unlike role-play situations (which provide the model for many politeness studies) the data in the current study reflect natural communication events.

For this study, I collected the initial, and where possible, follow-up messages of 31 native and 31 non-native[1] queriers who communicated with Ask-A-Linguist during the period 1998-2003. By collecting both initial queries and follow-up correspondence, I was not confined to drawing conclusions based solely on the restrictive query submission form, and as a result, I was able to collect a linguistically richer set of data. I arrived at 31 queriers as a cut-off in order to obtain a reasonable quantity to carry out a small, focused analysis on non-native email queries. My aim was to obtain an equal number of native and non-native message sets, two-thirds of which would derive from the archives over a five-year period; I chose this period of time so as to have a wider

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[1]   Languages/language groups represented in the study were: African, Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese, Indonesian, Hindi, Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, Czech, German, Swedish, Jamaican Creole English, French, and Spanish. (see Appendix A). These were verified by internal (e.g. direct mention in the text body) or external (e.g. follow-up query) means.

"overview" of the phenomena[2]. This required sifting through the Ask-A-Linguist web archives for expanded threads-that is, public messages with multiple interactions (multiple correspondences from one querier to individual experts).

After compiling the two groups, I identified several categories of notable marks of email (in)formality: (a) the ± inclusion of opening, closing, and signature, (b) the non-standard toggling of lower and upper case, (c) the use of non-standard abbreviations (i.e., of the *cos* 'because' type, rather than the style-neutral *Dept., Bldg., grad* types), (d) pro-drop (elimination of subject pronoun), and (e) the use of chat conventions (phrases like *BTW*, emoticons, etc.) and eye dialect (abbreviations of the *u* 'you' and *4* 'for' type). These chat conventions are largely English-linked, many presupposing a knowledge of Anglophone CMC style (or at least, Anglophone "casual note" or "Valentine" style[3]); therefore, I also included politeness categories as a natural extension of formality.

The primary speech acts that I was interested in were thanking, and requests; but I also examined the formality and politeness of the greetings (both opening and closing) and of the message body overall. Many of the greetings, closings, requests, and thanks showed overlap or involved indirect/illocutionary speech acts (such as a 'thank you' that functions simultaneously as a request or as a closing). For the sake of clarity, I have conservatively considered a thanks a closing only when it was set off from the message body with a hard return, and placed where closings like *Regards,* typically occur[4]. A thanks that had the pragmatic effect of requesting is a somewhat more complicated issue, and will be addressed in a later section.

4.   Findings: formality and casualness; and politeness

The results show differences between natives and non-natives along several pragmatically linked structures. The primary differences investigated were the salient structures linked with internet-specific structures, along with style niveau markers such as greetings/closings/signatures. Additionally, canonical politeness mechanisms were investigated, namely thanking and requesting.

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[2]   The style of the site was monitored over this time to ensure overall consistency of site format and answerer-style.

[3]   Of the type "RU4 me? IM4U".

[4]   Danet mentions the use of *thank you* as a "pre-closing" in hard copy formal letters. The use of *thank you* acting as the closing (rather than as the "pre-closing") seems to be a carryover from the handwritten memo or casual note; it has become quite common in email.

4.1   Email-linked structures

The following table shows the distribution of internet-linked informality features for native and non-native Ask-A-Linguist queriers: (1) the use of lower case, where upper case is standard, (2) the use of all caps on selected words for emphasis, where standard uses lower case, (3) non-standard casual abbreviations (like *cos* for 'because', etc.), and (4) eye-dialect and other chat-linked writing (phonetic spellings, emoticons, etc.). The values were calculated as follows: in order to obtain a normalized percentage value, the number of tokens of each phenomenon was divided by the number of lines of email text for each querier; then the mean percentage value was calculated over the queriers in each group.

The data show a higher variation for the non-native queriers than for the native queriers. This indicates that the non-native speakers of English in the study deviated widely in terms of whether they used net-linked features; that is, unlike the native speakers, whose usage of these features was more generalised (evenly distributed and judiciously used), non-natives engaged an all-or-nothing approach, composing messages that were either 'ultra-casual' or more formal (in this study, in fact, hyper-formal, as will be later discussed).

Casual abbreviations (like *cos, pls*) are distinctly native features; they are often opaque, and are acquired later in the learning process for written language. They are acquired by non-natives not likely until after spoken slang has been mastered, and they are not exclusive to email. Similarly, **all-caps** represents – except when used "innocently" or naively by newbies – a means to express English sentence stress, a strategy which is vacuous for those who are newly acquiring English, particularly since other languages often indicate pragmatic emphasis by other, e.g. lexical, means; this is a native-speaker strategy that is not easily recognised by non-natives in written English. **Eye/chat** and non-canonical **lower-case**, by contrast, are across-the-board features which are easily picked up just by visual scanning of English internet writing. They may immediately strike the learner as flagrant playful renditions of English orthography (which they are). Because they have the potential to be applied across the board, and because of their high-status (insider-linked) jargon-like nature with regard to internet writing, non-native speakers are likely to acquire them quickly in an effort to fit in socially, incorporating them handily into their own English-language communication over the internet.

The **pro-drop** phenomenon in the study is a slightly more complicated issue. Pro-drop is a strategy used differently in English, which is not a 'pro-drop language' per se. In 'pro-drop languages', the initial pronoun slot may be empty, even without an antecedent, and is part of the grammatical deep-structure (e.g. Spanish *Qué haces?* 'What do [you] want?'). In English, by contrast, it is a function of fast/casual speech, and usually occurs only-with first person singular, most often along with an empty auxiliary verb (e.g. *[I'm]*

In a hurry-[I've] got to go!). For other languages, e.g. Chinese and Arabic, the pro-drop phenomenon has intermediate status, showing as it does a special mixed distribution. In this study, pro-drop was used once in 5 lines by a native speaker of Arabic, once in 13 lines by a native Chinese speaker, once in 33 lines by a highly-English-proficient native speaker of Swedish, and 4 times in 30 lines by a near-bilingual in Japanese and English. Its use by the Arabic and Chinese speakers may reflect language transfer, especially since these speakers had a relatively high count of grammatical errors per lines of text, and since both languages are more likely to invoke pro-drop than English. The transfer question is less likely in the case of the highly English-proficient Swedish and Japanese speakers (who each show only one grammatical error in about 30 lines of text). However, the issue is not entirely straightforward: Swedish is not a strongly pro-drop language; Japanese is. The Japanese speaker invoked pro-drop four times (all in the final communication):

(v)

> [Ø]ᵢ Won't be able to go to Spain because of work, but [Ø]ᵢ have checked out Gumperz and quite a few others in an Amazon search. [Ø]ⱼ [verb-Ø] Making a nice impression on my credit card but [Ø]ᵢ look forward to reading what I ordered.

Of these instances, three (the first, second, and fourth) involved dropping the first-person singular, and one (the third) shows verb ellipsis as well as what is likely a dropped third-person singular in the same scope. Since the third pronoun ellipsis is not co-indexed with the others, this example reflects a combination both of transfer as well as of hyper-accommodation to a casual English norm. In this instance, the pro-drop capacity of both languages may have mutually reinforced this usage.

So to some extent at least, the use of pro-drop by the Swedish and Japanese speakers likely reflects a bit of "showing off" of their colloquial English-language skills alongside any transfer. Their more frequent use of (English) ultra-casual pro-drop also stands out because Ask-A-Linguist is a professional venue, one in which pro-drop is not completely at home. It is predictably rarer among natives in the study because they are better able to distinguish finer gradations of stylistic informality. At any rate, the results of the pro-drop count indicate that non-native pro-drop queriers are patterning on one of two extremes with similar effects but for opposite reasons: less-skilled non-natives are invoking pro-drop as a result of language transfer, and highly-skilled non-natives, by pro-dropping, are "ultra-casualizing" to reflect their high comfort level with colloquial English.

In terms of the connection of these phenomena as politeness indices, it should be noted that informality in canonical written correspondence (which includes nowadays email, but excludes IM/IRC/chat, SMS, etc.) is considered bad form, particularly in Asian contexts. So, whereas these strategies, judiciously

used, can signal warmth, cordiality, and collegiality in the West, they may be regarded as insubordinating, disrespectful, and face-threatening in the East. The wide range of use of internet-linked informality features among non-natives ultimately makes it clear that pragmatic skills are, as implied by Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993), among the last to be acquired by L2 learners.

4.2   Greetings, closings, and signature

Certain indices of formality and politeness in written letters can be found in greetings, closings, and signatures. In email, the very presence of these elements indicates some adherence to the norms already established for "hard-copy" letters, and an omission of any of these elements can serve to signal a certain level of informality. The style (in this case, the choice of lexis, address form, and punctuation) is diagnostic of the level of formality and politeness in an electronic message. In this study, the greater part of any message comprised four speech acts: greetings, requests (with or without pre-requests), thanks, and closings (with or without signature). This tight message structure results from the precise and limited function of Ask-A-Linguist, namely, to serve as a query-response service. It is expected that queriers post a request for information, and as a result, they frequently respond by thanking. Moreover, because the purpose of the service is so strictly defined, it is also within expectations that messages consist of little else but (i) in the case of the initial query: a greeting, a query (with or without background information), a closing, and a signature, or (ii) in the case of a follow-up email: a greeting, a thanks, a closing, and a signature.

The data shows that for the non-native group, 8 out of the 31 adhered to the strict message format-that is, they included one greeting (G), one closing (C), and one signature (S) (henceforth *GCS*) per message. Five others used no greetings, closings, or signatures. This was expected for four of these, whose only message was the initial form-driven query; the other one used no greetings, closings, or signatures despite having multiple messages. The remainder of the non-native group show a mixed distribution, and I show the breakdown for all non-natives in Appendix A.

In the native speaker group, 4 queriers used the strict GCS message format in all communications. Only one querier, sending 2 messages, failed to use greetings, closings, and signature. Twenty-six native speaker queriers showed a mixed distribution; of these, one invoked strict GCS in all but the original form-driven query. The breakdown for all native speakers is shown in Appendix B.

Now, to compare native and non-native results for the same features: the data in Table 2 (supra) show non-natives as about twice as likely to adhere to strict GCS message format. Although it appears at first blush from the numbers alone that non-natives are also more likely to dispense with GCS altogether,

this is skewed by the fact that four of the five in the no-GCS category had no communication past the form-driven query. So if these four are subtracted, natives and non-natives seem to pattern similarly in non-use of GCS. The figures for the mixed category, that is, where queriers use any combination of GCS, show that natives use "mixed" GCS about one and one half times more than non-natives do. That is, the non-natives are more likely overall to go for an "all-or-nothing" approach to GCS. In the case of native speakers, this indicates a high level of comfort with email and web interaction; for non-natives, it suggests adherence to letter-writing norms, either perceived norms in the L2, or, more likely, transference of their own culture's norms of letter-writing.

Because of the form-driven nature of the query service (see Fig. 1 supra), it is somewhat surprising that any of the initial queries included a greeting, closing, or signature at all. The instructions on the query submission form ask the user to "type your question here" and have separate form fields for name, topic, etc.; this structure does not provide a fertile environment for cordial "letter-like" communication, rather, it simply sets up an efficient and streamlined process for submitting a query. So, the appearance of these speech acts (greeting, closing, signature) in the original query may indicate a low comfort level with web-forms, or simply a minor adjustment or transition from email interaction to web-form interaction. It turns out that most of these highly-structured queries were produced by the non-native group. In most instances where the initial query lacked these elements, the follow-up email (not form-driven) contained them[5].

Similarly, in this study, non-natives used elaborate greetings, closings, and elaborate signatures-that is, multiple tokens of a greeting, closing, or signature in a single message-overall more than twice as much as the native speakers did. Elaborate greetings and closings are common in some societies (e.g., in Asian and African cultures); in some cultures (e.g., Arabic) they are used to show friendliness or familiarity toward the addressee (Scarcella & Brunak, 1981: 66; Ferguson, 1976). An elaborate greeting and introduction can be seen in this posting by a querier from Indonesia:

(vi)

Dear Sir/Madam,
Please allow me to introduce myself. My name's XYZ. You can just call me X. I am an Indonesian. Now I'm a college student studying at [...]

---

[5]   In cases of multiple exchanges, the level of familiarity appeared to grow, such that the final communication frequently contained no greeting, closing, or signature at all, such as that commonly found in familiar email (see Danet, 2001 for a discussion on redundancy in email message structure).

Elaborate signatures are common in many cultures (e.g. in Asian cultures) where it is important to signal status (e.g. Professor, Ph.D. student, etc.) and thus show (or allow to be shown) the appropriate level of deference. Anglophones' elaborate signatures involved city of residence or career description (Chicago, biotechnician), probably because these are, for these queriers at least, as likely in their culture at large, strongly linked with identity.

The natives and non-natives in the study used formal greetings and closings to an equivalent degree, but the natives used informal greetings about one and one half times as much as the non-natives did. Strong qualitative differences obtain between native and non-native greetings and closings (see appendices C-F). Preferred formal greetings among non-natives are those involving *sir* or *madam*, which would strike most natives as somewhat antiquarian and at any rate pointedly "hyper-formal"; natives appeared to have no clear favourites in the formal greeting category. Both natives and non-natives used *Dear + [first name]* as the most frequent formal greeting. In the formal closings category, natives strongly preferred *sincerely*, *regards*, and *thank you*; non-natives in the study strongly preferred closings which included the word *best*. Non-natives also notably used the somewhat antiquarian hyper-formal closings which include the word *yours* (e.g., *yours truly*). In the category of informal greetings, there were no clear preferences which distinguished natives and non-natives; an informal expression of thanks (i.e., *thanks* or *cheers*) was the most common informal closing for both groups. Natives in this study did not use *cheers* in this context (not even UK natives), and non-natives were essentially evenly split between *thanks* and *cheers*.

4.3   Data: thanks and requests

Negative politeness often takes the form of hedging and indirectness (usually found in **requests**) and deferential forms, which occur not only in greetings and closings (as just shown), but also in expressions of **thanks**. It is often difficult to tease out the requests from the thanks, particularly in email; email messages are often conceived as modular entities, and as such, the speech acts they contain may be highly compressed for the sake of efficiency. This means that requests framed as "pre-thanks" are quite common in email, more common, it seems, than they are in hard-copy professional letters. I will discuss these in a later section; first, I will simply point out the differences in the informal word *thanks* versus the formal *thank you* across the native and non-native queriers in the study.

The casual word *thanks* appears in almost equal measure among natives and non-natives. However, formal generic *thank you* is used about two and a half times as much by natives than by non-natives, and non-natives frequently invoke the self-reflective deferential marker *appreciate* or *grateful* to express thanks, using these terms about twice as much as do natives.

Requests are somewhat complicated. Because they potentially involve an imposition on the addressee, they are more likely to be face-threatening. For this reason, strategies to minimize the imposition are often invoked along with the request itself, resulting in requests that are complex both in their structure and in their pragmatic force. In some cases, the request is implied (indirect) rather than being stated explicitly in the sentence structure. I have listed and categorized all requests occurring in the study in Appendix G.

4.4   Requests

The data in Table 5 (supra) show that in the Ask-A-Linguist query forum, non-natives were twice as likely to use imperatives as natives were, although the tokens of this form were too low to show significance. Even so, the use of the imperative by non-natives is consistent with the observation by Scarcella & Brunak (1981: 69) that L2 speakers are typically linguistically more direct than natives, not likely due to cultural differences (transference), but because of the comparatively limited linguistic means at their disposal. Moreover, both natives and non-natives used *please* (once in the form of *kindly*) as a mitigator, indicating both groups' awareness of the pragmatic force and perceived face threat associated with the grammatical imperative. This also implies that there are universals associated with the perception of degree of politeness and deference inherent in the grammatical imperative. Of the individual instances, only one, by a non-native (*Please do guide me*) gave a directive that did not contain or consist of a request for an email reply. From all this it appears that requesting a reply is considered "standard procedure" for both groups. Nevertheless, the grammatical imperative is apparently felt to be sufficiently imposing or undeferential as to warrant an accompanying *please,* no matter how standard the request.

The modal *can* in the indicative was used as a quasi-direct strategy for making a request (this includes two instances of *may* used incorrectly or as an antiquarian usage for 'can'). Natives and non-natives used 'can' in almost equal proportions. The hedge *any* was used in all of the native-speaker instances of *can* to soften the request; only one of the non-natives used *any* (in the form of *anyone*) with *can*, indicating that the *can+any* concatenation as a pragmatic strategy is acquired somewhat later in L2 learning.

In this study, the use of a modal in the conditional in an interrogative sentence is almost exclusively a non-native speaker strategy for making a quasi-direct request (p < .05). It seems clear that this structure is widely taught to L2 learners and its importance as a politeness strategy consistently emphasized in the classroom. It is a construction that reflects a concatenation of three politeness strategies: (i) the question (ii) the modal (iii) the conditional. Using all three at once adds increased deference and politeness to the request, and as such, is indicative of non-natives' hyper-formality in the query forum venue.

An "anticipation strategy" was invoked more frequently in the conditional, and significantly more in the indicative of requesting by non-natives (p < .05). Anticipation is shown in the use of the future tense, the present-progressive-as-future, the phrase *look forward*, and generally the naming of the to-be-received action (a reply, help, etc.) as a direct object (of *await, receive*, etc.). When combined with a "pre-thanks", the anticipation strategy is a very efficient one, embedding as it does both a request for information conjoined with an anticipatory advance thanks for the likely future fulfilment of the request. Considering phrases like *best convenience, favourable reply, kind answer, kind help* to pragmatically indicate a thank-you, it turns out that all but four of the instances in the indicative, and all of the instances in the conditional, embed both a thank-you and an anticipation or expectation. These remaining four instances reflect anticipation only, with no embedded thanks, and three of these were produced by the non-native group. Since two of the three also contained grammatical errors, and one contained a hyper-casual pro-drop, the failure to embed a thanks in this context may reflect lack of querier familiarity with the "pre-thanks"/anticipation construction.

Looking at the differential distribution across the two anticipation types of request, non-natives tended more to use the indicative for pre-thanks/anticipation; natives used the indicative and conditional for the pre-thanks/anticipation to an equal degree. This again seems consistent with the Scarcella & Brunak (1981) observation that non-natives are frequently more direct; however, five of the fourteen non-native instances in the indicative mitigated the indicative with deferential markers (*willingness to answer, best convenience, favourable reply, kind answer, kind help*). Many of these, while technically grammatical, are felt as morphologically and pragmatically non-native, and thus likely reflect positive transfers from L1. Moreover, these phrases create a hyper-deferential effect which more than compensates for the directness inherent in the use of the indicative. On a side note, three of the four non-natives who used the conditional anticipation strategy used the word *grateful* to express pre-thanks; one native used it in the indicative. Three of the four natives used the hyper-formal phrase *greatly appreciate* for the conditional anticipation. *Greatly appreciate* was not seen at all among non-natives in the study, which reflects the fact that despite its hyper-formal flair, it is not considered standard form for professional letters. It may to a certain extent have "insider" status, since if it is considered neither colloquial nor standard-formal, non-natives may not have access to the structure at all.

Rare in the study was the use of pragmatically indirect questions. Unlike modal constructions, these place the entire force of the request on a main sensory verb, e.g. *know, see* (in one instance pragmatically implicit: *Any examples??*). Unfortunately, the number of these is too small to render any generalisations; however, what is immediately clear is that the native speaker

instance *Any examples??* appears very direct, and the non-native instances seem highly indirect, against the usual generalisation about native/non-native directness.

It appears from the results here that modals used in the conditional in declarative requests are more common among natives than non-natives. However, it is difficult to impute any meaning to this generalisation. It may be a simple matter that L2 classrooms teach request forms as concatenations of modals, conditional, and interrogative (as mentioned prior), given that modal+conditional+declarative and modal+conditional+interrogative do, from the chart, at first blush seem to be in complementary distribution. (In fact, the use of anticipation+indicative shows that if the conditional is a widely-taught form, it is not clear that non-native learners transfer it outside the concatenated construction modal+conditional+/-interrogative)[6]. Additionally, it is interesting to note that both of the non-native instances of modal+conditional+declarative are highly personalised statements, compared with only three of the eight of the non-native instances (*I'm wondering…; Something peculiar…, If you could somehow…*) (see Appendix G). Of these three personalized native instances, two used the question-diffusing hedge *I'm wondering if*, and the third contained three hedges: *If… somehow… maybe*); neither of the two non-native examples contained hedges.

The non-modal+declarative data show that at least in this study, declarative sentences that contain no modals and no anticipation ("pre-thanks" or otherwise), are used in request strategies primarily by natives and rarely by non-natives. Although the numbers are too low to show significance, it may anyway provide some indication that non-natives do not consider such structures to be sufficiently deferential or polite. In fact, the single non-native querier in this group uses several deferential markers (underlined) preceding the request, along with background information and a number of "pre-requests" which establish justification for the request, along with one justification following the request (background in italics, justifications in bold):

(vii)

> Dear sir,
>
> *I am a Ph.d student specialist in english language and linguistics. Currently I m working on my project which is entitled 'A Study of hedging in spoken Arabic with reference to English'* . **Unfortunately I am unable to get any reference about this subject because of the regional conditions which you might be fully aware of** . **Therefore** I should be much grateful and really <u>indebted to you</u> if you would kindly send me some references about 'HEDGING' . <u>I am sorry to disturb you</u> but <u>I am badly in need to your help</u>. If there is any possibility to help me please inform me and then kindly send the articles or whatever you have on the following address:

---

[6]   This is supported, for example, by the preponderance of the **would**-*pro*-**will** construction in professional Hong Kong English (e.g.: "The air conditioning in this station is under repair and thus the temperature **would** be affected during this time".)

[xyz]
I have a very limited access to the internet and the e-mail this is why I cant get references using them . Please sir answer me as soon as you can.
Waiting your kind answer I remain . Thank you very much in advance.

[xy]
Ph.D student

Indeed, all querier requests in the non-modal+declarative category mitigated the directness of the request by issuing highly personal statements of need (*seek, looking for, need*). One native speaker uses four mitigators: *all [that] I, really, brief, essence*.

4.5   Requests: additional observations

The modal+conditional+declarative data are consistent with claims by Scarcella and Brunak (1981) that non-natives are more likely to use personalized statements, and natives are more likely to use impersonal constructions; however, the non-modal data in the indirect question category show highly personalised statements by natives. So, the generalisation appears to be dependent on grammatical structure.

Overall in the entirety of the data, there were five non-native instances of the hedge-*any*, compared with eight instances among natives; conversely, there were two instances of *some* among non-natives, and only one (in the form of *somehow*) among natives. It is not clear that the overall number of tokens of *any* and *some* in the data are significant, but the native-speaker attraction of *any* with *can* (as with the *can*+indicative examples) is likely meaningful. At any rate, the generalisation by Scarcella & Brunak that hedges are more common among natives than non-natives is not strongly supported by the email data in this study.

4.6   Message body

It happens that the portions of messages that were purely informational-that is, where information was given or communication offered for its own sake and not as an indirect means of making a request or pre-request, etc.-were most often quite casual in style. This occurred in 29 out of the 31 cases of the native speakers:

There was considerably less variety sand less wide-spread use of this type of casual content with non-natives, occurring only with 9 of the 31 in this group. This may indicate that non-natives are more comfortable with negative politeness strategies than with positive politeness in the email query forum context, even as casual language has become quite common over (at least English-language) email, even with unfamiliar persons of "high" (or better, "expert") rank. The difference between non-natives and natives on this point

clearly reflects any one or a combination of the following: (1) lack of proficiency using colloquial structures in English, (2) transfer of L1 politeness behaviour with "expert"-ranked non-familiars, (3) unawareness of norms or discomfort with appropriateness of usage of casual English language, either over email or in an electronic query forum context.

5.   Summary and conclusion

The data in this study indicate that non-natives are much more likely to adhere to strict GCS message format, and that natives are more likely to dispense with GCS altogether. For non-natives, this is likely an issue of cultural transference (especially for Asians, whose letter-writing culture prescribes this format). For natives, the introduction of new, web-form specific cues such as "Type your question here" remove much of the impetus to use a standard formal email letter format in favour of a more forum-specific style of posting-a format which natives should be more commonly aware of, particularly as regards the pervasiveness of English-language media. For non-natives, on the other hand, the web-form is clearly perceived of not as a unique entity, but as modelled on formal email (which itself is modelled on-and essentially identical to-the formal hardcopy letter); This effect is strengthened by non-natives' heavy use of negative politeness structures, whereby greetings, closings, and signatures were often hyper-formal.

Requests were shown to be a complicated issue, despite the fact that the purpose of the Ask-A-Linguist query form is to request information or help. The results cannot be straightforwardly interpreted, but I believe there are important observations that can be made that relate to native and non-native reaction to the email query forum. To summarise the request data: non-natives were more likely to use imperatives than were natives, as predicted by earlier research on L2 competencies; however, the imperatives were mitigated with *please* to soften the pragmatic force of the directive. Modal *can* in the indicative for requests was used by natives and non-natives in equal measure, though natives overwhelmingly mitigated the construction with *any*, a distinctly English-language negative polarity item. And while the sub-sample of pragmatically indirect questions was too small for significant generalisations to be made, it is nonetheless interesting to note that most of these were made by non-natives, against earlier research claims of non-native tendencies toward directness. Interrogative requests using the conditional of a modal were much more common among non-natives, compared with the inverse results with natives using declarative modal sentences in the indicative. These reflect an over-adherence to taught politeness structures rather than instances of pure transference. Similarly, verbs other than modals used in declarative sentences in non-anticipation statements were primarily a product of the native speakers;

this seems to reflect a non-native perception that this construction is not sufficiently polite.

Statements of anticipation (including "pre-thanks") were expressed by native speakers of English using both indicative and conditional in equal measure; non-natives tended to use the indicative only, but compensated for this choice by using hyper-deferential and hyper-formal phrases like *favourable reply*, etc. While the casual word *thanks* appears in almost equal measure among natives and non-natives, natives use formal generic *thank you* about two and a half times as much as do non-natives. The formality level in non-native *thanks* is augmented by non-natives' more frequent (by two to one) use of the deferential markers *appreciate* and *grateful*.

It is clear that as stylistic norms in the internet rapidly evolve, it is non-natives who will be most challenged to keep abreast of them in addition to the challenges they already face in mastering English. This is particularly keenly felt, given that the internet was first developed in the US and its overall stylistic norms as a result were created largely by native speakers of English. The challenges brought by a new medium understandably leads non-natives to invoke hyper-formality, particularly for those who would be the least 'in the know' about evolving trends in English internet writing. This state of affairs is complicated by the fact that English seems to have become to a large extent the lingua franca of computer-mediated communication; and thus it may take outsiders-particularly non-native speakers of English-months or more in some cases to master the intricacies of English-based electronic communication.

As shown here, it is in particular stylistic formality and politeness that are affected. Not surprisingly, native speakers of English have a more thorough mastery of stylistic and pragmatic subtleties, even if their online behaviour reveals that they often ignore or even flout basic accepted rules of "netiquette" (see Millar, in press; Hale, 1996). Non-native speakers, by contrast, seem to "hyper-converge" to perceived norms of casualness or formality, and when uncertain, they may also transfer them from their native languages. The result is a wider stylistic range for these speakers in some media (as shown here) than seen in native speakers, such that non-native styles range from highly formal language to extremely casual expression. Non-natives' casual language usually takes the form of email-linked graphological features, like emoticons, lower-case, eye-dialect, etc., and reflect hyper-accommodation to perceived English-language norms of formality and casualness for email. This is the case despite the fact that the original request takes place on a web-form rather than in an actual email interface. The explanation is rather straightforward: chat- and email-linked features are highly accessible for non-natives because they occur frequently and are highly visible; thus, because speakers are metalinguistically aware of them, these forms can be more efficiently learned and incorporated into their L2 repertoire than can spoken-

linked colloquialisms, which may take several years of living in an English-speaking country to acquire. Moreover, these features retain some status as 'insider jargon', with the concomitant implication of 'hacker' prestige and expertise. In this sense, written internet communication can bridge the gap, buying time, as it were, for non-natives to assimilate more quickly to ever-evolving English language norms and English language culture.

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Appendix A

Tokens[7] of messages, greetings, closings, and signature for non-native speakers of English

name (coded)	native language/language group	number of messages	number of greetings (G)	number of closings (C)	number of signatures (S)
AM	African	1	0	0	0
SN	African	3	0	0	0
HI	Japanese	2	1 / 1	0 / 1	0 / 1
RG	Japanese	5	0/1/1/1/1	3	0/1/1/1/1
KG	Vietnamese	3	0	0	0 / 1 / 1
SG	Vietnamese	1	1	1	0
CY	Chinese	1	0	0	0
GY	Chinese	1	1	1	1
SK	Chinese	3	0	0	0 / 0 / 1
WN	Chinese	1	1	3	1
LU	Chinese	1	1	1	1
BS	Indonesian	1	1	1	1
TE	Indonesian	1	0	1	1
DA	Hindi	1	0	0	1
SA	Hindi	1	0	2	1
AD	Arabic	1	1	1	1
AR	Arabic	1	1	2	1
EA	Farsi	1	1	2	2
LI	Farsi	1	1	1	1
IE	Turkish	2	0	0	0 / 1
MA	Czech	1	0	1	1
GO	German	2	1 / 1	0	1/1
HE	German	2	0	0	0
RE	German	1	1	1	1
ID	Swedish	1	0	1	2
TE	Swedish	2	0/1	2	2
DY	Jamaican Creole	1	0	0	0
AS	French	1	1	1	1
ML	French	1	1	1	0
DL	Spanish	2	1 / 1	2 / 1	1 / 1
DRA	Spanish	1	2	1	1

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[7]   The diagonal slashes (/) indicate a separate message. So, for example, querier DL wrote two messages, each containing one greeting. The first message contained two closings, the second message contained one closing. Each message had one signature. (etc.)

Appendix B

Tokens of messages, greetings, closings, and signature for native speakers of English

name	number of messages	number of greetings (G)	number of closings (C)	number of signatures (S)
AX	2	0	0	0/1
BE	2	1/1	1/1	1/1
BL	2	1 / 1	0/1	2 / 1
BT	2	0	0/1	0/1
BY	2	0	0/1	0/1
DN	2	0	0	0/1
DNA	1	1	1	0
DRA	2	0/1	0/1	0/1
EK	4	1/0/1/0	1/0/0/0	1/0/1/0
JCE	5	0/1/1/1/0	0	0/1/1/1/1
JY	2	0	0/2	0/1
JA	2	1/0	1/0	1/0
JH	3	0/1/0	1	1 / 1 / 1
JLE	3	0/1/0	0	0/0/1
KN	1	0	1	1
LAY	7	0	0/0/0/1/0/1/0	0/1/1/1/1/1/1
LA	2	0	0	0/1
LE	2	0/1	0	0/1
LEY	2	0	0	0/1
LR	1	1	1	1
MW	3	0/1/1	1 / 1 / 1	1 / 1 / 1
MLE	2	1 / 1	0/1	0/1
OR	2	1/0	0	1 / 1
PT	2	0/1	0	0/4
PR	2	1/1	1/1	1/1
PL	2	1 / 1	1/0	1 / 2
RL	2	0	0	0
RN	3	0/0/1	0/0/1	0/0/1
SA	1	1	1	1
TF	2	0	0/1	0/1
VY	5	0/1/1/1/1	0/1/1/0/1	0/1/1/1/1

Appendix C

Formal greetings

Greetings (formal)	Natives	Non-natives
(Dear) Sir(s); Sir/Madam; Sir or Madam	1	4
To whom it may concern	0	1
Esteemed linguists	1	0
Good afternoon.	1	0
Dear fellow-linguists	0	1
Dear Mr. [surname]	1	0
Dear [first name]	7	7
Dear [initial][surname]	1	0
Dear [surname]	0	1
Dear Prof.	1	0
Prof. [surname]	2	0
Dear Mr./Professor [first name] [surname]	0	2
Greetings!	1	0
Total	16	16

Appendix D

Informal greetings

Greetings (casual)	Natives	Non-natives
hi, Hi, Hi!, Hello!	5	3
Hi [first name](!)(,)	6	5
Hello Mr. [surname]	2	0
[first name],	1	0
Nice hearing from you	0	1
Total	14	9

Appendix E

Formal closings

Closings (formal)	Natives	Non-natives
Sincerely,	4	1
sincerely yours,	1	1
yours sincerely, yours faithfully	0	2
Yours truly	0	1
I remain	0	1
regards, Regards,	5	1
Kind regards-	1	0
Best wishes	2	5
All (the) best!, Best, best regards,	3	5
T(t)hank you [etc.]	5	5
Total	21	22

Appendix F

Informal closings

Closings (casual)	Natives	Non-natives
bye	0	1
have a nice weekend!	0	1
xxx ['kisses']	1	0
Thanks [etc.], cheers	7 (thanks)	5 (2=thanks, 3=cheers)
please respond back soon	1	0
Your obsessive friend,	1	0
Total	**10**	**7**

Appendix G

Requests

a)   Imperatives (direct):

Natives	Please email me back
	Please respond back soon.
Non-natives	Pls mail me back and let me know
	Please do guide me
	If there is any possibility to help me please inform me then kindly send
	Please sir answer me as soon as you can.

b)   Modal can, indicative (quasi-direct):

Natives	Can any English language expert tell me if […]?
	Can you think of any […]?
	I appreciate any assistance you can provide me in this effort. [cross-listed in (d)]
	Any pointers you can pass on will be gratefully received! [cross-listed in (d)]
	Thank you very much in advance for any answer you can give me. [cross-listed in (d)]
Non-natives	Can anyone help me?
	Please can you help me[…]?
	Can you elaborate […]?
	Can you explain […]?
	Hope you may locate it for me. (may = 'can')
	May you give me some suggestions and information? (may = 'can')

c)   Modals, conditional, interrogative (quasi-direct):

Natives	Could you please provide some examples?
Non-natives	I would like to know (2)
	Would you be so kind
	Could you please give me some […]
	would you be so kind as to recommend […]?
	Besides, could you tell me[…]?
	Is there any chance you have a copy […] that I could have?
	If you know anything about […] I would really appreciate if you wrote back to let me know. [cross-listed in (e)]

d)   Anticipation, indicative (quasi-direct):

Natives	I will look forward to hearing from you.
	Any pointers you can pass on will be gratefully received! [cross-listed in (b)]
	Thank you very much in advance for any answer you can give me. [cross-listed in (b)]
	I appreciate any assistance you can provide me in this effort. [cross-listed in (b)]
Non-natives	I do appreciate your willingness to answer
	I appreciate your advice
	Anticipated thanks for you reply
	Thank you very much in advance
	I'm looking forward to receiving your reply at your best convenience.
	I'm looking forward to your favourable reply
	I will really appreciate your help
	I will appreciate it.
	Awaiting for your reply
	Waiting your kind answer.
	I am looking forwards to your reply
	I'll appreciate your kind help very much!
	I really appreciate your response
	Look forward to hearing from you!

e)   Anticipation, conditional (quasi-direct):

Natives	I would appreciate any leads or thoughts. [cross-listed in (g)]
	It would be greatly appreciated. [cross-listed in (g)]
	I would greatly appreciate any examples or suggestions. [cross-listed in (g)]
	Your help and guidance would be not only welcome but greatly valued and appreciated. [cross-listed in (g)]
Non-natives	I would appreciate if you wrote back
	I would really appreciate any help.
	I should be grateful if
	I would be most grateful if
	If you could provide any help […] I would be most grateful.
	If you know anything about […] I would really appreciate if you wrote back to let me know. [cross-listed in (c)]

f)   Indirect questions (indirect?):

Natives	Any examples?? [cross-listed in (h)]
Non-natives	By the way, do you happen to know any[…]? Have you seen […] recently?

g)   Modals, conditional, declarative (indirect):

Natives	I'm wondering if you might be able to tell me
	Something peculiar that I'm wondering if you folks might comment upon further.
	If you could somehow help me out maybe refer me to [...]
	I would appreciate any leads or thoughts. [cross-listed in (e)]
	It would be greatly appreciated. [cross-listed in (e)]
	I would greatly appreciate any examples or suggestions. [cross-listed in (e)]
	Your help and guidance would be not only welcome but greatly valued and appreciated. [cross-listed in (e)]
Non-natives	I felt I should ask.
	This information would help me a lot!
	I should be much grateful and really indebted to you if you would kindly send me [...].

h)   Non-modal, declarative (indirect):

Natives	What I seek is [...]
	Just looking for your opinions.
	All I really need is a brief paragraph giving the essence of the idea.
	Any examples?? [cross-listed in (f)]
Non-natives	I am sorry to disturb you but I am badly in need to your help.

Appendix H

Casualness in informational content

	Native	Non-native
quantifiers	**Some more a lot pretty much**	**really a lot**
exclamations	I swear honestly I had no idea! hahaha / hehe Wow! Oops! Really! For me! Ahhhh…	(here you are!) ah
truncated questions (also as indirect requests)	Like what? any examples??	--
"folksy" language	Fellow you folks lingo neat Will do. pointers Yankee transplants	no luck you know who to call yall
nominal idioms	Tough choice gut feeling a devil of a time	--
verbal idioms	Hunt down come up with was smoking crack [='crazy'] get [a person] to tear [a person] up (fig.) come in handy	check it out
discourse markers (especially for introducing a new topic)	Well anyway just [also as a hedging expression] sooooo Okay / OK	Okay just [also as a hedging expression]