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# “Mr Paul, please inform me accordingly”

## Address forms, directness and degree of imposition in L2 emails

Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis

University of Nicosia

The function of students' email requests to faculty is both transactional and interactional. Students' emails are not only sent with the aim of receiving some form of service but they also need to adhere to the interactional function of language in order to establish and maintain social relationships. Therefore, how to address their lecturers and how much directness is appropriate in the requests performed through this medium, are some of the most difficult choices that students have to make. This study investigates how L2 university students' academic requests are formulated through the medium of email, and examines the correlation between the forms of address, the degree of (in)directness and the degree of imposition of their email as a way to express e-politeness.

**Keywords:** emails, students, faculty, correlation, imposition, forms of address, (in)directness, politeness

### 1. Introduction

Out-of-class communication between university students and faculty members can take the form of face-to-face consultations, telephone calls, voicemail, Skype meetings and, more commonly, email communication. It has been argued that in recent years, email communication accounts for “about one third of [out of class communication]” (Bippus et al. 2003, 270). More than a decade later since Bippus et al.'s (2003) claim was made, and given the fact that emails can now be easily sent on a smartphone on the go, it can be said that this percentage has most certainly gone up and that students nowadays tend to rely almost exclusively on this medium when requesting lecturers to do things for them out of class (e.g. send them handouts, provide clarification and information on various academic matters etc.).

Thus, students' email requests to faculty are usually sent by students for transactional purposes (and are therefore task-oriented) with the aim of receiving some

form of service that usually falls within their academic rights. These electronic academic encounters also entail a clearly defined relationship and fixed speaker roles, rights, and obligations, but, even though, many of the students' e-requests address institutional topics that fall within their academic rights, it is not necessarily the case that the faculty member has an obligation to comply with the request (e.g. the student has the right to request an assignment extension but the lecturer does not have an obligation to authorize it). Similarly, the difficulty in performing the request is not always low, as this depends on what it is that the student is requesting from the lecturer. At the same time, some familiarity between the student and the faculty member usually exists.

Nevertheless, the function of these email requests is not solely transactional but interactional as well. Student emails are normally not simply sent with the specific purpose of getting some information or carrying out business (i.e. academic) dealings, but at the same time they need to adhere to the interactional function of language in order "to establish and maintain social relationships" (Yule 2002, 6), especially in this relationship which is a typically hierarchical one. In this institutionally unequal relationship, students are consequently expected to use status-congruent language that properly acknowledges their professors' higher institutional status (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Biesenbach-Lucas 2007), and to make a number of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic choices regarding their writing style and degree of politeness. These choices become even more challenging when the email writer is a non-native language speaker writing an email in a second/foreign language (L2).

This study investigates how L2 university students' academic requests to faculty are formulated through the medium of email. More specifically, the study investigates English email requests written by Greek EFL university students, and aims to establish whether these learners, when performing e-requests, utilize their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge (Thomas 1983; Kasper 1998) in such a way that the variables of address forms, (in)directness and degree of imposition influence each other as a way to express e-politeness.

More specifically, the research questions of the study are as follows:

1. What forms of email address do learners employ in their emails to faculty and is there a correlation between these forms of address and the degree of imposition of the e-requests?
2. How direct/indirect are the learners' e-requests and is there a correlation between the forms of address and the degree of requestive directness used in the emails?
3. Is there a correlation between the degree of requestive directness and the degree of imposition of the e-requests?

## 2. Setting the scene

### 2.1 Email language

Email as a form of communication has been available to the general public only since the mid-90s, making it the oldest mode of computer-mediated-communication (CMC). Studies on the characteristics of email language (Barron 2002, 2003; Crystal 2006; Herring et al. 2013) have characterized email a 'hybrid medium', and situated email language along the continuum between oral and written language, resembling informal letters as well as face-to-face or telephone conversations (Frehner 2008; Herring et al. 2013).

It has been argued that even though the language produced via email is undeniably written, it has features typically associated with speech. On the one hand, email messages are not oral but typed online, and are inevitably devoid of paralinguistic and non-verbal cues (although the use of emoticons and capitalization can be seen as a way to make up for these cues). At the same time, emails (especially professional ones) often follow an epistolary format (i.e. a business letter template) with a greeting, a main body and a farewell formula, and writers have the opportunity to revise and/or edit their message before sending it.

On the other hand, email discourse resembles speech because of its interactive, immediate, ephemeral, swift and often informal nature. Email exchanges often consist of short sentences ('I will be there'), single words ('Sure') or even emoticons (such as a smiley ☺), as a way to express paralinguistic and non-verbal cues. Email is, therefore, not just a form of letter-writing, and its format and style can vary significantly depending on the communicative function and the situation. Openings (e.g. 'Dear X'), might be missing, closings and signatures can be omitted, and abbreviations and non-standard spellings (e.g. 'u', 'thanx') may also prevail. As Danet argued (though admittedly in 2001), email is "a new kind of letter writing" (2001, 52), one which does not as yet have any established conventions for linguistic behaviour. Crystal places email language under "Netspeak", which is "a type of language which displays features that are unique to the Internet" (2006, 19).

Even though email is no longer the preferred medium for private correspondence, especially among young adults and teenagers who choose instant messaging and SMS over emails, this medium is still the preferred form of communication in the workplace. It is also the most preferred computer medium when teens wish to communicate with adults such as teachers (Frehner 2008). Unlike instant messages which are more about contact than content, email appears to support longer distance relationships and it is used more for information purposes (Longmate & Barber 2002). Thus, given its emphasis on content, its appropriacy for distant relationships, and its swift transmission, email is also preferred for transactional

purposes, and unsurprisingly, an increasing number of university students readily send email messages to their professors to request services and/or information on a variety of academic issues. Dürscheid and Frehner (2013, 35) explain how email has lowered the inhibition threshold to contact someone. Being less personal than a letter, it is a relatively unobtrusive form of communication which encourages people, who would not otherwise write a letter, to communicate in writing.

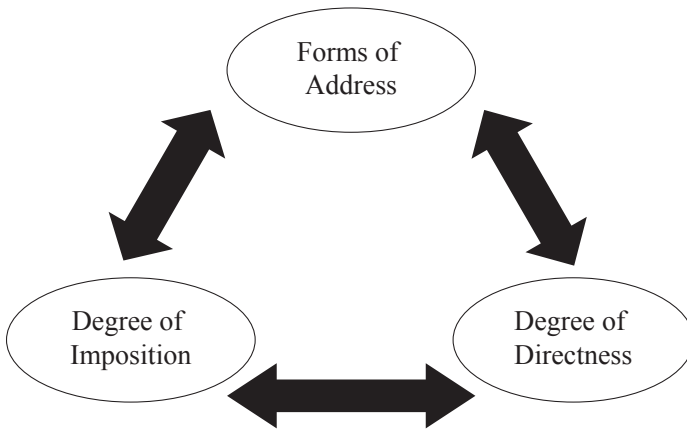
One phenomenon that has been argued as being typical of email language is its informal style (Dürscheid & Frehner 2013). This has been found to be often the case in student-faculty email interactions as complaints from faculty regarding students' emails range from impolite tone, to inappropriate informality and directness, inappropriate salutations, abbreviations, spelling and grammar errors (Glater 2006; Biesenbach-Lucas 2007). The email writers of the current study are all young adults in their 20s who can be seen as belonging to a CMC generation, the first generation to grow up with digital technology (Prensky 2001). Prensky notes that today's students have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using tools of the digital age, and "computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives" (2001, 1). At the same time, being able to easily access and send emails from their smartphones (often on the go) can be seen as lowering the threshold of what and how requests can be asked, therefore increasing the likelihood for email brevity, informality and directness.

The politeness of the language that university students use during these email encounters with their lecturers is an important issue which has been the focus of a number of investigations (e.g. Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Biorge 2007; Chen 2006; Hallajian & Khemlani 2014; Hardford & Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Hendriks 2010; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). The aim of some of these studies was to examine how students use status-congruent language in order to acknowledge the status inequality of this hierarchical relationship, and the extent to which students make a number of successful pragmatic choices regarding their writing style and degree of politeness.

The way in which speakers and hence email senders choose to formulate a request, and most specifically, the degree of directness/indirectness they employ, have been found to be affected by a number of social and situational/contextual variables. The most widely discussed and tested variables are those of social distance, social power, and imposition of the requested act, proposed by Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) influential model of politeness. The authors maintain that these factors combine in an additive fashion, thus the greater the hearer's power, social distance between interlocutors, and degree of imposition of the act, the greater the face threat will be and the greater the degree of indirectness to be employed by the speaker. Following Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) argument, the present study examines whether L2 Greek learners of English, when performing academic

requests through the medium of email, utilize their pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge (Thomas 1983; Kasper 1998) in such a way that the variables of address forms, (in)directness and imposition influence each other as a way to express e-politeness.

The correlations examined can be expressed visually in Figure 1:



**Figure 1.** Interrelationship of the variables of forms of address, imposition and degree of directness

## 2.2 L2 forms of address

How to address the interlocutor when performing a request is often one of the most difficult choices that speakers/writers have to make. “Forms of address are relational because they promote the negotiation of face (involvement or independence) between the interlocutors in order to create or reinforce the social relations between them” (Félix-Brasdefer 2015, 204) both in spoken and written communication (including CMC). The choice of forms of address in an academic context where students address their lecturers is far from clear-cut and prefigured. Danet (2001, 77) observed eleven different openings in relation to student emails, which fall into four categories: (a) formal, traditional ones (‘Dear title + surname’), (b) informal greetings appropriate to face-to-face and telephone conversations, or personal letters (‘Hi/hello’ with or without first name), (c) forms which aim at maintaining the etiquette while being a bit more informal (‘Greetings’), and (d) avoidance strategy (no opening).

Similar to other contexts, the decision of how to address the interlocutor in intercultural communication can be based on a number of different social/contextual and cultural variables. Such variables might be the degree of familiarity

between the interlocutors, the existing power difference, the degree of imposition of the request, the speakers and hearers' rights and obligations, the urgency of the request, the cultural background and the L1 of the interlocutors, the formality or informality of the relationship as well as the personality of the hearer (Scollon & Scollon 2001; Rau & Rau 2016).

The results of empirical studies that have focused on the forms of address employed by students in oral academic interactions confirm Danet's (2001) observation that there is not one specific address style that students are expected to use or one that predominates among students. For example, Formentelli (2009) found that, despite Britain's growing informality of address in institutional encounters, British students employed formal forms as a way to convey respect and deference. Similarly, Merrison et al.'s (2012) examination of British and Australian students' requestive emails found that the use of formal titles occurred more frequently in British students' data than in the Australian ones. Formentelli and Hajek's (2016) more recent study found that the informal 'First Name' strategy was the form that the majority of students at an Australian university used, followed by strategies such as 'excuse me' and 'hand up'. However, according to the same study, the default strategy in American academic interactions was the formal V-form ('Professor', 'Title + last name'). A preference for formal openings was also revealed in Wei-Hong et al.'s (2015) study which examined Chinese and Taiwanese students' emails. The authors attribute this formality to the students' high power distance cultures: "The learners seemed to prefer their own cultural style of showing more deference in their use of opening strategies" (2015, 12).

Email studies, however, indicated a preference for informal forms of address as regards to students' emails. Results from Bou-Franch (2011) indicated that students' email interactions produced in a Spanish academic context mostly oriented to solidarity with their professors, while Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch's (2013) examination of opening sequences in British English and Peninsular Spanish students' emails similarly indicated that both groups of students orientated themselves toward informality.

Importantly, Bjorge (2007) argues that the forms of address employed depend greatly on students' cultural background. Her investigation of the forms of address of international students' emails in Norway revealed that the forms of address employed depended greatly on students' cultural background. Emails written by students from high-power distance cultures (Hofstede 1980, 2001) favored formal greetings such as 'Dear Professor/Sir/Madam/Teacher', 'Dear Professor + First Name (FN) + Last name (LN)'. Students from low power distance societies (Hofstede 1980, 2001) favored informal greeting such as 'Dear + FN', no greeting, 'hi/hello + FN'. Such cultural interference was also found in Li et al.'s (2011) study which examined the English emails that Taiwanese students sent to their

professors. Over half of the students' emails addressed the professor as 'Dear teacher' (2011, 159), a direct translation from Mandarin. Huang (2009) explains that in Chinese, addressing a person by his/her occupational title rather than his/her given name expresses greater respect and politeness. Similarly, a number of Cypriot L2 learners of English in Economidou-Kogetsidis' study (2011), employed email address forms that were translated directly from Greek (i.e. 'title + FN' – e.g. 'Mr George') which are unacceptable in English but could be seen as causing no pragmatic failure as none of the English native speaker participants commented negatively on this construction.

To the best of my knowledge, no study has so far focused on examining whether there is a possible correlation between the email address form employed and the degree of imposition of the email request. Similarly, no study has examined the existence of a possible correlation between the forms of address and the degree of (in)directness employed in L2 emails in academic encounters. The current study aims to examine these relationships with the hope to shed some light into how the email as a medium might influence the speakers' pragmatic choices.

### 2.3 Emails, (in)directness and degree of imposition

Interlanguage research on L2 learners' requests has consistently found that learners' requests are characterized by a higher degree of directness as compared to native speakers (e.g. Fearch & Kasper 1989; Trosborg 1995; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2003; Félix-Brasdefer 2007; Hassall 2012). This tendency was also confirmed by a number of email studies which found that L2 email writers, from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, generally opt for higher requestive directness (Chang & Hsu 1998; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth 2002; Biesenbach-Lucas 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Krulatz 2012; Zhu 2012; Lazarescu 2013; Alcon-Soler 2015) and often fail to achieve a balance between pragmatic clarity and politeness.

A number of studies on speakers' linguistic strategies found imposition to be consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) predictions, confirming an increase in indirectness with the severity of the social offence (e.g. McLaughlin et al. 1983; Trosborg 1995; Fukushima 2000; Schauer 2007). However, how speakers/writers perceive the degree of imposition involved and consequently adjust their linguistic choices (including the degree of (in)directness) is connected with their sociopragmatic knowledge. As Kasper and Rose (2001, 2) explain, sociopragmatic knowledge relates to the social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation and performance of communicative action. This, consequently, concerns how they assess speakers' and hearers' social distance, social power, their rights and obligation, and the degree of imposition involved.



For Fukushima (2000), the degree of imposition depends on factors such as time, effort, financial burden, and psychological burden on the addressee. This definition also includes rights and obligations since imposition is also influenced by whether the requester has a right to make a certain request and whether the requestee has an obligation to pursue the request (Fukushima 2000, 88). Some of students' email requests can be seen as falling within the students' academic rights (e.g. receiving information concerning the lecturer's office hours) while others do not (e.g. being allowed to submit an assignment after the due date). Similarly, certain email requests might fall within the lecturer's academic obligations (e.g. providing feedback on written work) while others might not (e.g. preparing a recommendation letter for a weak student).

To the best of my knowledge, only a few interlanguage studies have provided information regarding imposition in relation to L2 learners' email performance. In Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig's study (1996), the learners' pragmatic infelicities which were identified were primarily caused by lack of acknowledgment of the degree of imposition on the addressee, indicating that the degree of imposition was not a decisive factor for the learners' pragmatic performance. Unlike Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig's finding (1996), however, Félix-Brasdefer (2012) who examined L2 Spanish requests to faculty, found that the preference for request strategies was conditioned by the level of imposition of the request (2012, 110). For example, direct strategies predominated in lower imposition requests and conventionally-indirect requests occurred more frequently with higher-imposition requests. One of the aims of the present study is to make a contribution to this understudied area by examining the possible correlation between the degree of imposition and the degree of (in)directness employed in the email request.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Data and participants

The email data used for the investigation consisted of 200 authentic emails sent to 11 teaching faculty members. The participating faculty members were asked to randomly forward to the researcher student emails addressed to them that included a request and were written by Greek Cypriot students in English. An auto reply mail was setup in the Outlook Express of the participating faculty informing senders that their message might be used for analysis and offering them the opportunity to respond accordingly if they did not wish for their email to be included in the study.

The emails were written by undergraduate or postgraduate students (NNSs of English) who were studying at a private, English-medium university in Cyprus.

Due to the data collection method employed, no homogeneity could be established regarding the students' age and English language proficiency, and no information could be confirmed regarding students' gender. Yet, following the nature of the institution where the majority of the student population falls in the age range of 18–25, it could be expected that the majority of these emails were written by this age group. Judging by their writing and the English language entry requirements of the institution, the English language proficiency of these students varied from B1 to C2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.<sup>1</sup> Some of these students knew the faculty personally (as they were already attending their courses) while others were contacting the faculty for the first time.

The recipients of the email messages were eleven, full-time teaching faculty members between 35–45 years old. Two of these faculty members were native speakers of English but had lived in Cyprus for more than 15 years at the time of the study. The rest were of Greek or Greek Cypriot origin, had lived in the U.K or the U.S.A for more than ten years and had native-like proficiency in English.

The email requests collected involved both requests for information and requests for action of varying degrees of imposition. They were 'self-contained' requests and not part of longer exchanges (i.e. follow-up requests in a chain of messages).

### 3.2 Procedure

Each of the emails was analysed and coded with regard to (a) its degree of imposition, (b) the form of address employed, and (c) the degree of directness.

#### 3.2.1 *Degree of imposition*

In order to be able to investigate the degree of imposition, the email requests were divided into 5 categories according to definitions adapted from Condon and Čech (1996, 73) and Félix-Brasdefer (2012, 97). These included:

1. *Requests for information/requests for appointment* (e.g. 'Will you be in your office after class?',<sup>2</sup> 'I would like to ask you what dates and hours I can visit you in your office').

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1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is a guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe. B level (B1–B2) is assigned to those language learners who have a lower/upper intermediate proficiency of the foreign language. C level (C1–C2) concerns learners who have an advanced/native-like competence of the foreign language.

2. The examples provided here are authentic examples from the data of the current study.

2. *Requests for validation or confirmation*; these are requests that seek information, or verification of information already provided in the course of a previous conversation, or confirmation for receipt of submitted work (e.g. 'I would like to know when I can submit the project'). Requests for validation/confirmation are more imposing and more face-threatening than requests for information/appointment as they require information that has already been provided to the speaker and should therefore already be known to the interlocutor. In an academic context, such requests can imply that the student was not listening when he should have been listening to the information provided (Félix-Brasdefer 2012, 97).
3. *Requests for feedback/explanation/academic advice* (e.g. 'What does the assignment title mean?', 'Is it a good idea to start my thesis this semester?'). Such requests are more imposing than (1) and (2) because more effort and time is required on the part of the lecturer to provide feedback or advice on academic matters.
4. *Requests for an extension* (e.g. 'Is it possible to give me an extension until Sunday for my essay?'), or for *rescheduling an appointment* (e.g. 'Can we please rearrange our meeting?'). Extension requests are more imposing than requests (1)–(3) due to the fact that they fall outside the students' academic rights. At the same time, they put extra pressure on the lecturer by interfering with his/her schedule. Similarly, requests for rescheduling an appointment are additional burden on the lecturer because they also interfere with his/her schedule.
5. *Requests for action*. These are requests which attempt to get the lecturer to do something for the speaker which falls outside the professor's immediate obligations and outside the students' rights, and as such they are the most face-threatening. These might include asking the professor to prepare a letter of recommendation, reschedule/authorize a make-up exam etc. (e.g. 'What I would like to know is if you are willing to pass me without presenting my last speech').

The level of imposition posed by these requests can be represented along a continuum from low, medium to high imposition (1 being the lowest and 5 the highest). In requests that are classified as low-imposition requests (levels (1) and (2)), the lecturer has low difficulty in performing the act because the time, effort, and psychological burden involved (Fukushima 2000) are particularly low. At the same time, low imposition requests fall clearly within the student's academic rights and the lecturer's responsibilities. As the time, effort and the psychological burden increase, and the requested act falls less within the lecturer's responsibilities and the student's rights, the degree of imposition of the e-request also increases. Medium and high-imposition requests become automatically more face-threatening.

### 3.2.2 *Forms of address*

The forms of address employed in the students' emails were analyzed along the dimension of formality-informality-zero form of address. The emails were thus classified into 3 categories: (a) those which included a *formal* form of address by making use of the recipient's surname (e.g. 'Dear Dr Brown',<sup>3</sup> 'Dr Brown'), (b) those which included an *informal* form of address by making use of the recipient's first name (e.g. 'Dear Peter', 'Dear Ms Angelica'), (c) those which included no salutation (i.e. avoidance strategy/zero form of address), or a greeting only without the recipient's name (e.g. 'Hello/Hi', 'Good afternoon'). Some of the forms of address found in the data involved constructions inappropriate in English, albeit acceptable and widespread in Greek (i.e. 'title + first name', e.g. 'Mrs Maria').

### 3.2.3 *Degree of directness*

Regarding the dimension of directness/indirectness, the taxonomy used in Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) was utilized in order to analyze and code each email request (see Appendices A and B). Requests for action and requests for information were analyzed on a separate scale of directness,<sup>4</sup> and all email requests were analyzed along the dimension levels of (a) most direct/bald-on-record strategies, (b) conventionally indirect, (c) non-conventionally indirect strategies (hints) (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). Requests were further analyzed along the dimension of substrategy levels (e.g. imperative/mood derivable, want statements, query preparatory etc.). (Please see Appendices A and B for further details.)

## 3.3 Scoring and statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the three variables of imposition, directness, and forms of address. In addition, in order to examine the correlation and measure the statistical association among the three, the statistical procedure used was the Chi-square test for Association (Pearson Chi-square) suitable to determine "the presence of an association between two qualitative variables" (Kinnear & Gray 2000, 262).

3. The lecturers' real names have been replaced in the examples with pseudonyms for anonymity.

4. Hassall (1999) argues that requests for information ('asks') need to be analyzed separately from requests for action. This is mainly to do with one of the strategies for asking for information, the 'direct question' (e.g. 'Does John live here?'). Although a direct question is the most direct way of all to ask for information, a question is *not* direct as a means of asking anything other than information (e.g. a good or a service) (Hassall 1999, 594–595).

4. Results

4.1 Forms of address – degree of imposition

The results in relation to the forms of address employed by the learners (research question 1) revealed that the majority of their emails (59.5%) were phrased with a formal form of address. These formal salutations were employed mainly with a ‘Dear + title + surname’ form (e.g. ‘Dear Dr Brown’) (19%), a ‘title + surname’ (e.g. ‘Dr Brown’) (21%), or a ‘greeting + title + surname’ form (e.g. ‘Hi Dr Brown’) (8.5%) (see Table 2).

On the other hand, 22.3% of the emails were phrased with an informal form of address. Most informal salutations were employed with a ‘title + FN’ (e.g. ‘Mr Paul’) (9%), ‘Dear + FN’ (e.g. ‘Dear Paul’) (7%), and ‘Dear + title + FN’ (e.g. ‘Dear Dr Angelica’) (6%).

Finally, the avoidance strategy (zero form of address) was used in 10.5% of the emails. In 3.5% of the cases, the emails included only a greeting (‘Hi/Hello’) but omitted the recipient’s name, while 7% of the emails included no form of address (e.g. Example (1)).

- (1)

I am [student’s name and surname] from the class Poetry A. Can you please tell me my grade in the final essay?  
Thank you in advance.

Table 1 summarizes the quantitative analysis of forms of address for overall preference as far as the specific choice of construction is concerned.

Table 1. Forms of address – No. of emails: 200

Formal	119 (59.5%)
Dear + title + surname	38 (19%)
Title + surname	42 (21%)
Title + FN + surname	6 (3%)
Dear + FN + surname	3 (1.5%)
Dear + title + FN + surname	3 (1.5%)
Dear + title	1 (0.5%)
Dear + title + surname + FN	1 (0.5%)
Dear + surname	4 (2%)
Greeting + title + surname	17 (8.5%)
Greeting + title+ FN + surname	2 (1%)
Title (e.g. Miss/Dr)	2 (1%)

Table 1. (*continued*)

<b>Informal</b>	<b>60 (30%)</b>
Dear + FN	14 (7%)
FN	1 (0.5%)
Title + FN	18 (9%)
Dear + title + FN	12 (6%)
Greeting + Dear + FN	5 (2.5%)
Greeting + FN	4 (2%)
Greeting + title + FN	6 (3%)
<b>Zero</b>	<b>21 (10.5%)</b>
Greeting	7 (3.5%)
Zero address form	14 (7%)

As regards the degree of imposition of the email requests, most e-requests produced (46.6%) were requests that fell in the upper end of the imposition scale (requests for action – high imposition). The second most popular requests were requests for feedback, explanation, or academic advice (29.1%); these involved an average degree of imposition. Finally, 16.2% of requests involved the lowest degree of imposition (i.e. requests for information/appointment). These results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Email requests – degree of imposition (No. of emails: 200 / No. of e-requests: 265\*)

[1] Requests for information/appointment	43 (16.2%)
[2] Requests for validation or confirmation	16 (6%)
[3] Requests for feedback/explanation/academic advice	77 (29.1%)
[4] Requests for an extension/appointment rescheduling	6 (2.3%)
[5] Requests for action	123 (46.4%)

\* Some emails included more than one request

In order to examine whether there is a correlation/association between the forms of address employed and the degree of imposition of the request (research question 1), Chi-square tests for Association (Pearson Chi-square) were run. The statistical analysis revealed that there is *no association* between these two variables ( $X^2 = 8.85$ ;  $df = 8$ ;  $p(0.36)$  NS). The two were not associated with each other and all type of address forms (formal/informal/zero) were employed in requests across all levels of imposition.

4.2 Forms of address – degree of directness

The analysis in relation to the degree of directness of e-requests (Table 3) indicated that the learners resorted largely to direct/bald-on-record strategies (63%). This finding was more prominent in the case of requests for information where 18.5% of these requests were phrased using a direct question (e.g. ‘Is there going to be a course for French II in Fall 2016?’). An important number of bald-on record requests were also phrased with the imperative (14.3%) and as want statements (12.5%). At the same time, 33.2% of the students’ e-requests were phrased with conventionally indirect strategies (‘can/could you’, ‘would it be possible’ etc.), and 3.4% as hints. These results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Degree of directness – main strategies and request substrategies (No. of emails: 200 / No. of e-requests: 264\*)

<b>Direct/bald-on record</b>	<b>167 (63%)</b>
[1] Imperatives	38 (14.4%)
[2] Elliptical	0 (0%)
[3] Performatives	23 (8.7%)
[4] Want statements	33 (12.5%)
[5] Need statements	7 (2.7%)
[6] Expectation statements	8 (3%)
[7] Reminder requests	3 (1.1%)
[8] Pre-decided statements	6 (2.3%)
[9] Direct questions	49 (18.5%)
<b>Conventionally indirect</b>	<b>88 (33.2%)</b>
[10] Query preparatory	88 (33.3%)
<b>Non-conventionally indirect/hints</b>	<b>9 (3.4%)</b>
[11] Hints	9 (3.4%)

\* Some emails included more than one request.

In order to examine the correlation/association between the forms of address employed and the degree of email directness (research question 2), Chi-square tests for Association (Pearson Chi-square) were run both for the main strategy levels and the request substrategies. Although the statistical analysis found no association between the form of address and the specific substrategies employed ( $X^2 = 28.21$ ;  $df = 20$ ;  $p(0.11) > 0.01$ ), *association was found* between the forms of address and the main strategies used in the emails ( $X^2 = 15.72$ ;  $df = 6$ ;  $p(0.02) < 0.05$ ). Contrary to what was expected, and as can be seen from Figure 2, the emails that began with a formal form of address utilized primarily a bald-on-record request strategy, and, at

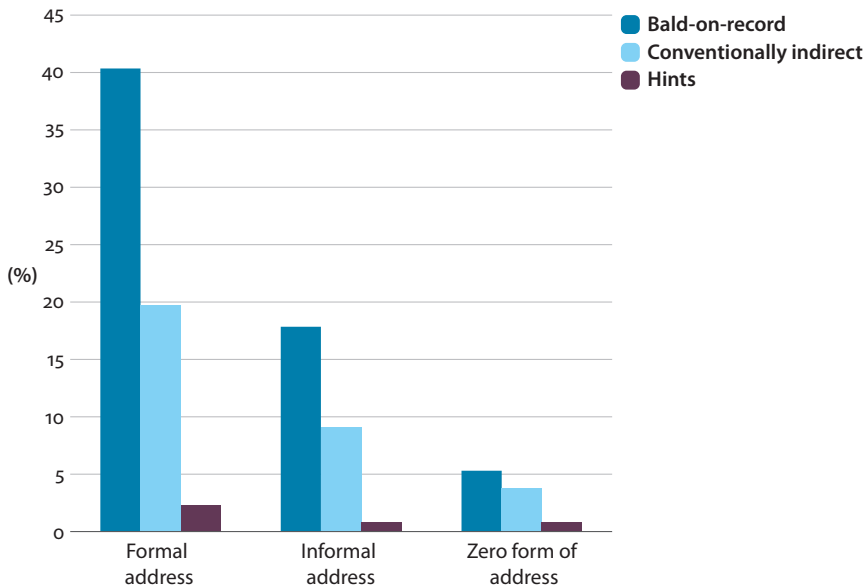


Figure 2. Forms of address and main strategies

a lower frequency, a conventionally-indirect strategy. At the same time, and in line with what was expected, bald-on-record strategies were also utilized with informal forms of address.

The examples below are typical email examples from the data which combine a formal form of address with a bald-on record strategy (the first request is expressed with a 'please + imperative' structure while the second is a performative request):

- (2) Dear Dr [lecturer's surname],  
I have sent you the proposal. Please have a look. Your opinion counts!  
Thank you in advance,  
A. M [student's name and surname]  
MBA MIS
- (3) Hello Mrs + [lecturer's surname]  
I would like to ask you what dates and hours can i visit you in your office  
so you could advice me about a problem i have in MIS major with a class?  
Thanks,  
Best Regards,  
A.Z [student's name and surname]



4.3 Degree of directness – degree of imposition

The study finally examined whether there is a correlation/association between the degree of email directness and the degree of email imposition (research question 3). The Chi-square tests for Association found association at a 0.01 level, both between the main strategies used and the degree of imposition ( $X^2 = 30.28$ ;  $df = 12$ ;  $p(0.00) < 0.01$ ), and between the substrategies used and the degree of imposition ( $X^2 = 77.22$ ;  $df = 40$ ;  $p(0.00) < 0.01$ ). Contrary to what was expected, high imposition requests (i.e. requests for action) were associated mainly with bald-on record strategies and to a lesser extent with conventional indirectness. Medium-imposition requests (i.e. requests for feedback/advice) and low-imposition requests (i.e. requests for information, requests for validation) were also mainly associated with bald-on-record strategies (see Figure 3).

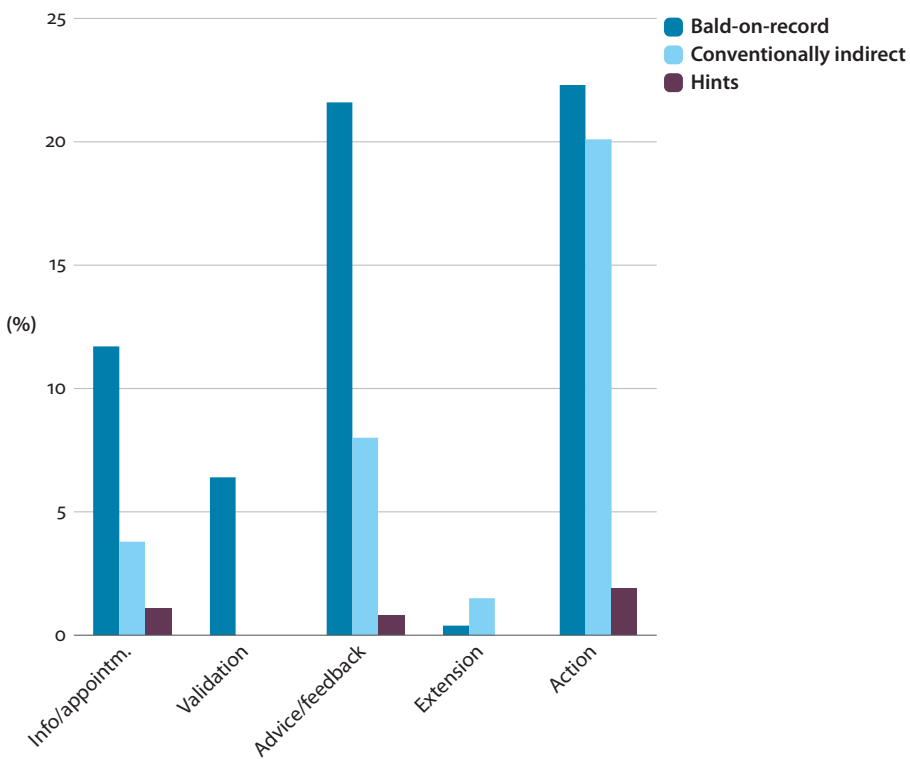


Figure 3. Main strategies and degree of imposition

Imperative requests, performative requests (e.g. 'I would like to ask...') and want statements were mainly associated with requests for action (i.e. high imposition requests). Conventionally indirect substrategies ('can/could/would you mind...') were also mainly associated with requests for action, while direct questions were associated with requests for feedback/advice (i.e. medium-imposition requests) and, to a lesser extent, with requests for information/appointment (i.e. low-imposition requests) ( $X^2 = 77.22$ ;  $df = 40$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

Examples (4) and (5) are typical examples from the data. They both involve high imposition requests expressed with bald-on-record strategies (a want statement, a 'please + imperative' structure and a direct question).

- (4) Hello,  
 Sorry for bothering you. I don't want to find out my final grade I just want to find out what I got for the final exam if this is possible. I insist because I studied hard to pass the course and I just want to know how I did. If you still cannot give the grade for the final please tell me when the results are given out.  
 Thanks for your time.  
 M.P.
- (5) Mr + FN,  
 As I missed a lesson from university I would kindly ask you to inform me regarding my essays and assignments. Do I have to give to you my other essay that I did not give to you yet? Please inform me accordingly in order for me to prepare them and give them to you during my next lecture.  
 Take care,  
 M.N.

## 5. Discussion

This study has investigated the possible correlation among the variables of email address forms, (in)directness and degree of imposition, as a way for L2 learners to express politeness in the power-asymmetrical email requests to faculty.

In line with previous interlanguage email studies (e.g. Chang & Hsu 1998; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth 2002; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Krulatz 2012; Lazarescu 2013), this study found the L2 email writers to resort largely to direct/bald-on-record strategies, thus confirming the overall preference for L2 learners to opt for a high degree of requestive directness in their emails. This preference for directness might be connected to the use of emails from a smart device, which is now a particularly widespread practice. This practice is making email

language more comparable to text messages (SMS) than formal letters, and the email directness observed presently might be related to the students treating their emails to faculty as 'formal text messages'. Text messages are typically brief, short, spontaneous, and informal, they tend not to be reread or edited (Frehner 2008), and the emphasis is on 'getting the message across' often through explicitness and subsequently directness.

In examining the correlation between the degree of email directness and the forms of address employed, the present study found an association between the address forms and the main strategies used in the email. This association suggests that the choice among the address forms and the directness strategies is not a random one. Instead, it seems possible that the learners have utilized their universal pragmatic knowledge for this online encounter. Whether the choice is a successful one or not is of course an important question. Contrary to the expectation that formal forms of address are usually combined with less direct strategies (typically employed with conventional indirectness), this was not confirmed by the results of the present study. The study found that formal forms of address were combined primarily with bald-on-record strategies, and, only at a lower frequency, with conventionally-indirect strategies. The combination of formality with directness seems to point again towards the mediated nature of these encounters and the hybrid nature of email language, which can retain some of the features of business letter writing (such as formal forms of address) and some of the features of informal spoken language and text messaging such as explicitness and brevity.

It is worth noting that the age of the learners seems to be an important factor influencing the use of the email as a *medium* of communication. The participating students were all older teens or young adults in their 20s, and can be seen as belonging to the "Millennial Generation"<sup>5</sup> (Strauss & Howe 2000), a CMC generation which is the first generation to grow up with digital technology (Prensky 2001), and is therefore generally characterized by an increased use and familiarity with communications, media, and digital technologies. These students are, according to Prensky (2001, 3) "digital natives", that is, native speakers of the digital language of computers, and as such it could be claimed that their pragmatic choices might not necessarily be only culture-specific or interlanguage-specific. Instead their pragmatic choices may be generation-specific, associated with "Netspeak" (Crystal 2006, 19), the internet language whose unique nature often allows for spoken and written language features to mesh.

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5. The Millennial Generation or "Millennials" are also known as the "Generation Y" (Strauss & Howe 2000). There are no precise dates for when this generation starts or ends but demographers and researchers typically use the early 1980s as starting birth years and early 2000s as ending birth years.

It can also be argued that the correlation between high directness and formal address forms might be the result of pragmalinguistic transfer from Greek and the phenomenon of directness and formality expressing negative politeness. Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2005) study which examined Greek service-encounter telephone requests adds support to the phenomenon of negative politeness operating through the use of directness. It was argued that the Greeks' higher directness achieved social distancing and was motivated by clarity, urgency, goal orientedness, and minimizing imposition (i.e. negative rather than positive politeness – Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987). Brown and Levinson (1987, 130), when discussing negative politeness, admit that directness can sometimes mark deference (when “bothering important persons for favours”), and explain that “there is an element in formal politeness that sometimes directs one to minimize the imposition by coming rapidly to the point, avoiding the further imposition of prolixity and obscurity”. Similarly to the Greek callers of Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2005) study above, it seems likely that the L2 Greek email writers of the present study were also motivated by clarity and goal orientedness. The email directness, therefore, might be employed not because such requests do not constitute an imposition on the part of the students, but, on the contrary, because they are an imposition that has to be kept to a minimum. A similar suggestion is also made by Merrison et al. (2012) in explanation of their unexpected findings relating to the use of aggravators and direct strategies in their British email corpus. Like the Greek students, Merrison et al.'s British participants were also found to be more direct and more deferential than their Australian participants, and they used primarily formal titles in their emails to faculty (i.e. professional titles like *Dr...*) (2012, 1094).

In the same vein, Wierzbicka (2003) characteristically illustrates the phenomenon of negative politeness in the Polish culture by referring to the example of “Mrs Vanessa! Please! Sit! Sit!” (2003, 27) where a Polish host greets the visitor cordially and offers her a seat of honor with these words. Even though in Wierzbicka's rather humorous example an informal form of address (‘title + first name’) is used, the pragmatically unsuccessful flat imperative request serves to express formality and negative politeness.

Moving on to formality, a number of pragmatic studies on Greek politeness/speakers indicated that formality in Greece still has a stronghold (Koutsantoni 2005; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Bella & Sifianou 2012, Sifianou, 2013). Sifianou (2013, 90) explains that “there are many situations where institutional formality is expected. A clear example of this is the university context. Unlike in Britain or the U.S., it is almost unthinkable for Greek students to use informal language and in particular first-name terms of address with faculty”. This claim was also supported by Bella and Sifianou (2012) who explored e-mail requests sent to faculty members by Greek students and found that the single constant feature in these e-mails was

the use of formality (2012, 109), expressed, among other things, with the formal second person plural (V-form) “a marker of status-incongruent and socially distant interlocutors” (2012, 93).

The present study further examined whether there is a correlation between the degree of email directness and the degree of the email imposition, and found that the preference for requestive (in)directness was indeed conditioned by the level of imposition of the request. This result again indicates that when students write email requests to a professor, they utilize their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge (Thomas 1983; Kasper 1998; Félix-Brasdefer 2012, 112) in order to achieve e-politeness. However, this knowledge was not utilized as expected. It was expected that learners would employ bald-on-record strategies in low-imposition requests and less direct strategies in medium and high imposition requests. Yet, contrary to this expectation, direct/bald-on-record strategies predominated in low, medium and high-imposition requests. This finding is contrary to Félix-Brasdefer’s (2012) results which showed that L2 Spanish learners were able to appropriately vary the degree of their email directness according to the degree of imposition. It can be suggested that the Greek learners’ sociopragmatic competence was not sufficient to allow them to vary their directness according to the degree of imposition and thus make the most appropriate choices in a relationship where the negotiation of face relationships is asymmetric (Scollon & Scollon 2001; Félix-Brasdefer 2012, 112). Their emails, therefore, might be seen as being capable of causing pragmatic failure (Thomas 1983) due to the fact that their coercive tone appears to give the faculty no choice in complying with the request.

A miscalculation on the part of the students regarding their academic rights and the lecturers’ academic obligations towards them might come into play when explaining the students’ inability to vary their strategies according to the size of imposition. As mentioned earlier, imposition as a contextual variable encompasses interlocutors’ rights and obligations, and its size is based on factors such as time, effort, and psychological burden on the addressee (i.e. lecturer). Given the young age of the student participants and possibly their limited exposure to tertiary education (as the majority were undergraduate students), it could be possible that these students failed to estimate correctly the burden of their requests and the time and effort needed on the part of the lecturer to carry out the requested act.

The miscalculation of the students’ academic rights might also be related to the commodification (Fairclough 1992) that education and universities have undergone in the last few decades. The commodification of education has led to universities and colleges to treat applicants as consumers (Wong 2016), and students, in turn, to view themselves as customers with specific customer rights. It is therefore likely that the private university students of the present study are unaware of what their exact academic vs. consumer rights are, and this has, therefore, prevented them

from adjusting their email directness accordingly. Further research is needed to shed more light on this.

The findings of the present study which showed that the majority of the email requests involved high-imposition requests might again be connected to the email as a medium, and to the argument that the email has lowered the inhibition threshold to contact someone (Dürscheid & Frehner 2013, 35) in order to ask something which you would not otherwise ask. At the same time, the fact that emails can now be sent from a smart phone (often on the go) additionally lowers the threshold of *what* requests can be asked. This might also be an explanation as to why the majority of students so readily send high imposition requests to their lecturers. Strońska and Cecchetto (2013) also make reference both to non-native and to native students' inability to adjust their email requests according to the degree of imposition, and to use appropriate politeness strategies in their emails. They explain that:

we as instructors see in our e-boxes emails that clearly contradict the assumption that young adults know how to use language instrumentally and, more important, appropriately in order to achieve their goals. These emails come from both students who are native speakers and those who are non-native speakers of English.

(2013, 165–166)

The students' inability therefore to adjust the directness of their email according to the degree of imposition might also relate to the effects of the instant messaging culture where speed, directness and brevity prevail. Further research is needed to allow us to confirm the exact effect that the mediated nature of these encounters has on learners' pragmatic choices.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations for further research

This study investigated how L2 university students' requests to faculty are formulated through the medium of email, and examined the correlation between the forms of address, the degree of (in)directness and the degree of imposition of their email as a way to express e-politeness.

The study found an overall preference for formal forms of address and for high requestive directness on the part of the L2 learners. Correlation was also found between the address forms and the degree of directness employed as the learners were found to employ formal forms of address with bald-on-record request strategies. It was argued that these correlation results indicate that the learners' pragmatic choices can be unsuccessful in achieving a balance between pragmatic clarity and politeness.

The correlation between formal forms of address and bald-on-record strategies was related to the phenomenon of negative politeness operating through the use of directness and formality. It was also claimed, however, that the study's findings seem to also point towards the role of the email as the medium of communication, and to the mediated nature of these encounters. Students' inability to vary their strategies according to the degree of imposition, their preference for directness and formal forms of address might be related to the hybrid nature of email language, while students' preference for directness seems to be connected to the use of email from a smart device, a practice which has made email language more comparable to text messages (SMS) than formal letters. Due to the nature of the data, however, it was not possible to establish which messages were sent from a smartphone and which ones from a computer. Further research is needed to shed more light on this.

In addition, the present research did not investigate the effect of the variable of familiarity (between the student and the lecturer) on the selection of address forms and (in)directness strategies. As this is certainly an influential factor which may explain differences in the choice of terms of address, it also requires further research. Finally, the study did not examine students' beliefs and attitudes in relation to this academic encounter. Qualitative data of how these email senders view the student-lecturer relationship, what they believe about their academic rights and the lecturers' responsibilities, and how they perceive the degree of imposition of these requests, would allow us to interpret their linguistic choices more confidently.

Perhaps most importantly, further research is needed into how digital technology, and email in particular as a medium, can affect students' requestive choices. Comparing students' oral requests with email requests, as well as native speaker with non-native speaker email choices will allow one to establish the extent to which learners' pragmatic email choices are interlanguage-specific, culture-specific, or the product of the CMC generation to which these participants belong.

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## Appendix A. Degree of directness – Coding categories for e-requests for action (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 18)

Directness level	Request strategies	Examples
Most direct	Imperatives	– Please note what changes should be made.
	Elliptical requests	– Any comments?
	Performatives	– I have to ask for an extension for a week.
	Want statements	– I would like to have an extension
	Need statements	– I need a little more time
	Expectation statements	– I hope you'll give me the weekend to finish my assignment.
	Reminder requests	– I would like to remind you of my reference letter
	Pre-decided statements	– I will hand my assignment in tomorrow.
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory	– Can/could.../ Would you mind.../ I would appreciate it if....
Hints	Strong hints/ Mild hints	– I have some trouble understanding the essay question.

## Appendix B. Degree of directness – Coding categories for e-requests for information (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 19)

Directness level	Request strategies	Examples
Most direct	Direct questions	– Did you get my project?
	Elliptical	– Any news?
	Imperative	– Please let me know if you have to withdraw me from class.
	Performative	– I would like to ask if ...
	Want statements	– I would like to know what your policy is on...
	Need statements	– I need to know if....
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory	– Could you tell me....
Hints	Strong hints/ Mild hints	– I tried very hard to find your office but couldn't find it.

### *Author's address*

Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis  
 Department of Languages and Literature, School of Humanities and Social Sciences  
 University of Nicosia  
 46 Makedonitissas Avenue  
 Nicosia 1700  
 Cyprus  
 kogetsidis.m@unic.ac.cy

