



A Cross-cultural Pragmatic Study on Openings and Closings in Upward Academic Request Emails

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This study reports on a study of the use and forms of openings and closings, as rapport-management strategies in academic request emails to university instructors by graduates, who formed three discourse communities, i.e. Chinese, British and Chinese English speakers. Using discourse analytic techniques, a total of 187 emails from 155 postgraduates were analyzed and a number of similarities and differences or divergences were identified. The findings suggest that the discursive practices were subject to intricate and dynamic relations between a number of macro- and micro-contextual factors, and some technical features of emails against different socio-cultures. It is hoped that the results will contribute to enhancing knowledge in the field of rapport management and electronic communication across cultures.

Keywords: Rapport management; emails; openings; closings; cross-cultural pragmatics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural pragmatics was mainly inspired and exemplified by the studies conducted within the framework of the Cross-cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) [1] and studies accomplished by Wierzbicka [2,3]. As for Blum-Kulka [4], it is mainly concerned with cross-cultural variation in modes of speech act performance. Specifically, it concerns a widely researched area like contrastive pragmatics, i.e. cross-linguistic comparisons of particular types of speech acts such as requests, compliments, questions, thanks, directives and apologies, and interlanguage pragmatics, which is mainly focused on the study of non-native speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language. Following this research trend, a large amount of empirical research has been done on examining the performances of these speech acts and the use of politeness strategies for a specific speech act by speakers against different socio-cultural contexts.

This study is focused on how the Chinese, British and Chinese English speakers manage rapport through openings and closings in their academic request emails to university instructors. It is supposed to be added to the body of the existing research of cross-cultural pragmatics. Empirically, it is to spring forth the scope of the majority of the previous studies which have mainly focused on the politeness of speech act realization. Theoretically, the study takes rapport management as its central concern, proposed to break away from Brown and Levinson's politeness that is limited to consideration of the management of face and ignores the management of sociality of rights [5,6]. Specifically speaking, the study is aimed at investigating openings and closings as distinctive stylistic features of rapport management in upward academic request emails, in respect to the relationship that exist between their forms and uses, and the national and discourse-community culture, the sociolinguistic variables such as the email writers' identities construction, status and social distances with the email recipients.

The paper first reviews previous research on emails, especially on openings and closings parts. This is followed by a review on some relevance theories, i.e., rapport management theories, which provide a theoretical framework and the methodology of discourse analysis for this study. In the findings section, the use of

openings and closings of the three discourse communities is described and compared, along with how these linguistic features contribute to rapport management. The findings are then discussed and explained from socio-cultural perspectives. The paper is then ended with a conclusion and some implications.

2. BACKGROUND

Electronic mail (email), as one of communication systems of computer-mediated communication (CMC), has been the most widespread and commonly used tool for electronic communication from the end of the 20th century [7]. It has become a very important medium for both interpersonal and institutional communication, particularly in academic and business institutions, due to its high transmission speed and less "intrusive" nature than traditional letters [8]. Moreover, at universities and colleges, email assumes more functions besides communication, including the delivery of materials as well as course management [9,10]. To summarize, it has largely taken the place of written memos and much telephone and face-to-face interaction and become a "fact of life in many workplaces" [11:456].

Due to the above reasons, emails have triggered the increasing scholarly research. However, earlier research has just characterised the main features of emails through description of its language, especially through comparing the language with written and oral face-to-face language. In respect to these research, emails were claimed to be highly informal due to its oral nature [8]. Only in recent years, as Bou-Franch [11] reviewed, has much research been taken another step forward to underline social variability and diversity in language usage of emails and concentrate on the discourse practices of different social communities.

The previous research has generally agreed that the internal organization of emails is generally divided into three components: openings, topical sequences or body and closings [8,11-14]. The following email from the data of the research illustrates the three different parts of emails. It is coded in what follows:

(Openings) Hello... (With the teacher' given name),

(Topic Sequences/Body) I know this is a long shot, but I remember you using a really

interesting article on interlace back when we did OE: Language, Texts and Culture... It had lots of lovely pictures. Can you by any chance remember who it was by?

(Closings) Thank you. All best,

(Signature with Writer's given name).

Openings and closings of emails are "mainly phatic, interpersonally loaded structured slot, mostly empty of content regarding the goal or reason for the interaction" [11:2]. Hence, they have recently merited some attention in linguistic research [8,11,12,14-17]. This is because, as Waldovel highlights, openings and closings play a very important social role in emails as in other interaction forms. The openings and closings are regarded as politeness markers because they attend to recipients and meet the addressee's 'face needs' [18].

The openings and closings mainly fall into stylistic domain, which is interacted with other four domains such as illocutionary domain, discourse domain, participation domain, and non-verbal domain to play roles in the process of rapport management [5]. According to Spencer-Oatey [5:13-14], rapport management, as an interactional or interpersonal dimension of communication, refers to "the use of language to promote, maintain or threaten harmonious social relations". It is composed of two major elements: "the management of face and the management of sociality rights". Face is separated into two interrelated aspects: 'quality face' and 'identity face'. Quality face refers to people's desire to be positively evaluated by others according to their personal qualities. It is thus comparable to Brown and Levinson's positive face. On the other hand, identity face refers to "our desire for people to acknowledge and uphold our social identities or roles". Meanwhile, sociality rights consist of two components: 'equity rights' and 'association rights'. Equity rights refer to people's primary belief that they are entitled to personal consideration from others and to be treated fairly, which is comparable to the negative face proposed by Brown and Levinson. Association rights are described as a fundamental belief of people that they are entitled to be associated with others and are in keeping with the type of relationship that they have with others.

The openings and closings are supposed to play an important role in the emails with potentially face-threatening requests in the current study.

As Spencer-Oatey [5] maintains, rapport management addresses both "face needs (where our sense of personal/social value is at stake), and sociality rights (where our sense of personal/social entitlements is at stake)." During the communication with request emails, both face needs and sociality rights of interlocutors may be challenged. This is because, in all occasions, there is an asymmetrical power relationship between students and university instructors (with instructors being higher status than students). The requests would make the instructors feel being unduly imposed upon because of the students'/email writers' lower "position power" [18]. The request act would thus pose threat on the recipients' equity rights, which is believed by Spencer-Oatey [5] to be a 'base of rapport'. The email requests are then rapport challenging, which may force the email writers to work out how to maintain/enhance a harmonious relationship with the recipients by doing rapport management. In other words, the email writers should attend to interlocutors' face needs and to negotiate their mutually interwoven sociality rights in different domains of emails. The openings and closings of emails, which are mainly composed of greetings, terms of address, farewells, are specifically concerned with "choice of register, choice of tone, and level of deference" [19:383] and thus are indispensable in the process of rapport management.

The framework of rapport management is thus believed to be especially fit for the study of the use and forms of openings and closings in the emails. However, as Spencer-Oatey reviews, research into the rapport-management domains, other than the illocutionary domain, has not been systematic. And some research has only been involved in certain components. In contrast with pyramids of research building on Brown and Levinson's framework of politeness, few empirical studies have been built on the wider framework of rapport management. Therefore, the current empirical study, together with other studies [10,19,20-26] alike in recent years, echoes the appealing for more empirical research on rapport management.

The other motivation for the current study lies in that previous research findings on the opening and closing were not consistent. Some research [8,13,27] claims that emails tend to be oral and informal due to the characteristics of their conversational immediacy. Consequently, the openings and closings are liable to be short and informal and even to be left out. Nevertheless,

Bou-Franch [11] asserts that these findings were untenable because most of Spanish emails in her studies contained openings and all the emails contained closings. In addition, she finds that the opening and closing mechanism in the study are diversified, which has challenged the validity of the claims of homogeneity of language use in emails such as openings and closings.

The contradictory research findings are due to user-related aspects interacted with other multi-factors such as technological, social and interactional influence. Therefore, as Bou-Franch [11] has suggested, openings and closings in emails are needed to be further studied within broader sociocultural context.

To the issue, more studies under the rapport management framework on openings and closings of emails against multi-cultural background are required. In response to this requirement, this study aims to investigate and compare the use and forms of openings, as rapport-management strategies in Chinese and English request emails, because Chinese culture is generally regarded as collectivism and high-ranked power distance, while British culture is indexed as individualism and low-ranked power distance [28]. In specific, the study is firstly a 'cross-cultural' study, which investigates and compares data gathered independently from different cultural groups [6], i.e., upward academic request emails by Chinese speakers and English speakers. It thus fills the research gap that the prior research focused too heavily on English emails and ignored Chinese emails. Secondly, the study is an 'intercultural' study, which explores the data people from one cultural group interact with the other cultural group [6], i.e., upward academic request emails by Chinese speakers of English. Therefore, the intercultural and interlanguage performance of openings and closings in emails could be disclosed.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

In addressing the research aims put forth above, three groups of postgraduate students, totalling 155 were involved in this study. They are argued to form three discourse communities. The demographic information of the participants and how they form discourse communities are detailed below.

Group 1: Sixty-five Chinese postgraduate students who provided 65 emails, from a key

university in Nanjing, China, referred to as native speakers of Chinese (CSs).

Group 2: Forty-five British postgraduate students who provided 60 emails, from University of Sheffield, UK, referred to as native speakers of English (ESs).

Group 3: Forty-five postgraduate students from China, studying in the University of Sheffield for more than half a year or longer, who provided 62 emails, referred to as non-native speakers of English (CESs).

This study follows the general concept proposed by Davies [29], who defined the native speaker as having six characteristics. First of all, all the participants in Group 1 and 2 were Chinese- and British-born citizens. They had acquired Chinese or English as their native language in their early childhood. In other words, they are closely associated with Chinese or English in which they grew up as a child. Moreover, all the participants are graduate students, the fact of which means they have received a higher education. According to this fact, it is more plausible to believe that these participants could more possibly meet the other five criteria: 1) having intuitions about their idiolectal grammar; 2) having intuitions about features of the Standard Language grammar; 3) having a unique capacity to produce fluent spontaneous discourse; 4) having a unique capacity to write creatively; and 5) having a unique capacity to interpret and translate into their native language.

Participants of Group 3 are regarded as non-native speakers of English. They were born in China and started their English learning at secondary school according to Chinese education policy. In respect to their postgraduates status in UK universities and the entry requirements of English by these universities, it is reasonable to believe that they have met the requirements through the performance of IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or other English test. And their English proficiency could be regarded at an intermediate level or at an advanced level, which was confirmed by these students' own beliefs in respect to the results of the questionnaire (See Appendix).

The email writers are argued to meet specific entry levels to form discourse communities. According to Saville-Troike [30], Swales [31], and Virtanen and Maricic [32], a discourse community

comprises a group of people who are related to each other by occupations, special interests, shared knowledge, possessions and beliefs or behaviour. Members are involved in a discourse community through persuasion and relevant qualification. In view of these points, it is argued that university instructors and postgraduates who used emails for academic communication form a good example of discourse community. At first, this community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals. Specifically, the members interact with each other for the same purpose, i.e. the benefit of the postgraduate' academic development in universities. Secondly, the discourse community uses emails as a participatory mechanism to interact with each other for the sending and receiving of academic information. The members may use some specific email genres for requests, apologies, discussion and queries. In this study, the postgraduates who wrote the request emails may also share some specific lexis and have a certain level of relevant content and discursive expertise.

In respect to the current study in particular, the argued construction of discourse communities probably makes it more logical to investigate and compare the postgraduate students' practices of rapport-management strategies in request email across the three groups. This is because similar discourse communities from different culture backgrounds may have different practices. Therefore, the study was expected to show the specific genre conventions of the three discourse communities.

3.2 Instruments

Instruments used to elicit data are composed of two parts:

1) Background Questionnaire

A background questionnaire would make it possible to explore the impact of various demographic factors on email writing. Therefore, a background questionnaire was circulated at the beginning among the three groups. The questionnaire was mainly concerned with nationality, which is supposed to be a variable to influence the participants' choices of rapport-management strategies in the openings and closing of emails. As for the postgraduate students who came from China mainland to Britain, the questionnaire explored their self-evaluation of English proficiency.

2) Task of Providing an Authentic Request Email

In this part, the participants were asked to copy and paste one or more emails which had been sent to university instructors recently. The email was required to involve requests for academic purposes, so that any confidential or personal emails were excluded. They were also asked to mark how close their relationship is with the recipient through a five-scale. Finally, they were asked to confer whether they wanted to manage a harmonious relationship with the email recipients (the rapport orientation).

3.3 Data Analysis

The participants were invited to join in the research voluntarily through the university web systems and Survey Monkey, a famous website for web-based surveys. As a result, a total of 187 emails were eligible for further analysis.

In addressing the research aims, this study firstly identified the openings and closings parts of each email. Openings function as an identifying and/or saluting message to the target addressee, as well as identifying the addressor [33]. It could be realized through one to two moves.

1) Opening Salutations. This move functions as the starting point of an email with an address and/or greetings for the recipient. It includes address forms such as Dear (Respected) + recipients' names, and Greetings (e.g. *Hi! How are you! Hope you are well!* or the typical Chinese way like *Nin hao*, which means *Hello, Respected you*).

2) Identifying Self. The function of this move is to introduce the email writer to the target addressee by including the writer's name and/or background information. It typically appears in the Chinese emails as *I am...*(full name) with personal information.

Furthermore, the function of closings of emails is invariably to bring the email to a pleasant close [33]. It is usually composed of one to four following possible moves.

1) Looking forward to Further Contact. This move might possibly borrow from print epistolary correspondence conventions like *I look forward to hearing from you (soon)* or *Hope to hear from you soon* [34]. It is used by the writers to convey an expectation that the recipients will contact the sender at a later stage. The move is usually constructed into an independent paragraph by itself or with other closing moves.

2) Thanks. This move, such as Thanks!, Many thanks! or Cheers!, appeared at the end of the emails. In addition to showing gratitude to the recipients, the move may serve as a device to end the email and hence is more likely to be very short and simple.

3) Complimentary Close. The function of this move is always to bring the email to a pleasant close. It is usually composed of two parts (steps): *Good wishes* and Formulaic expressions such as Kind regards or Regards. In Chinese emails, the writers preferred to employ the expressions from print epistolary correspondence conventions, like End with my respect.

4) Signing off. This move was also used to bring the emails to an end. The email writers may sign their given name or full name with/without their personal information. In some Chinese emails, some writers put the date after their names to end the emails.

These uses and forms were analyzed to identify the influence of the sociolinguistic variables of status, social distances, and rapport-management orientations under national and community culture. The analysis was done on a simple count of the various types of features and moves cross-tabulated to the variables.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 The Uses and Forms of Openings

The openings of emails were involved in two moves: Opening Salutation, which is composed of address terms, salutations and greetings; and

Identifying Self. The following details the distributions in the emails of the three discourse communities.

1) Address terms

The address term was divided into two contrasting forms: the formal address term and the informal address term. The formal address term is usually combined with the title and surname of the recipient or is just formalized with the title only. In Chinese data, the title was exclusively presented by *Laoshi*, which means teacher or professor. In English data, the title was usually presented by using the recipient's academic title like professor or doctor. Or sometimes it was presented by Mr, Mrs, Sir or Madam. On the other hand, the informal address in this study refers to addressing the recipient's name (given name or full name) without any title, or addressing the recipients with other forms like you. Table 4.1 below demonstrates the distribution.

As the table shows, almost all the Chinese emails (97.0%) contained a formal address term, which was mainly presented by title + last name (90.8%) or occasionally by title only (6.2%). In contrast, in the emails by British postgraduate students, the formal address term title + last name appeared occasionally (10.0%) and the address term represented by title only never appeared. Finally, the frequency of the formal address term in CES's data (43.6%) fell between the one in CSs' and ESs' data, in which the address term title + last name (37.1%) occurred much more frequently than the address term with title only (6.5%).

Table 4.1 Address terms in the emails by members of three discourse communities

	CSs (Total of emails=65) No. of emails with the form		ESs (Total of emails =60) No. of emails with the form		CESs (Total of emails=62) No. of emails with the form	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1. Formal address term						
1) Title only (sir, madam, professor)	4	6.2%	0	0	4	6.5%
2) Title + surname	59	90.8%	6	10.0%	23	37.1%
Total	63	97.0%	6	10.0%	27	43.6%
2. Informal address term						
1) Given name	0	0	48	80.0%	32	51.6%
2) Full name	0	0	0	0	3	4.8%
3) None or others	2	3.0%	6	10.0%	0	0
Total	2	3.0%	54	90.0%	35	56.4%

Furthermore, a majority of ESSs' emails (90.0%) contained an informal address term, which was presented by the addressee's given name. And some few ESSs' emails used an informal address like *ya* following *hi* to address the recipients. However, the CSs' did not contain any kind of informal address terms which addressed the recipients' given names. Moreover, like the frequency of formal addresses in the CESs' data, which was in the middle of the three groups, the frequency of the informal address with given names of the recipients in the CESs' data was also in the middle (56.4%). None of the CESs' emails included such informal address as *hi ya* appearing in the ESSs' data.

2) Salutation and Greetings

The salutation in this study refers to a prefatory greeting in an email. It typically appears at the very beginning of English emails like *Dear...* and *Hi...*, which were usually combined with the address terms. In Chinese emails, the salutation

was usually realized with two forms: 敬爱的... (Respected and dear...) and 尊敬的... (Respected...). In contrast, the greetings in this study refer to the greetings after the salutation and address terms, which took typical forms in the Chinese emails, such as 您好 (Hello honorific-you) and 你好 (Hello you). In English emails, the greetings did not appear as commonly as in those of the Chinese emails. Table 4.2 and Table 4.3 demonstrate the distributions of the salutation and greeting forms in the emails of the three academic discourse communities.

As the table shows, in the ESSs' emails, it was found that the salutation *Dear...* did not occur as frequently as *hi...* (45% vs. 53.4%). However, in the CESs' data, the salutation *Dear...* appeared much more frequently than the salutation *hi...* did (71.0% vs. 24.2%). Furthermore, the salutation *Dear...* was almost exclusively combined with the addressee's given name in the ESSs' data.

Table 4.2. Salutation in the emails of members of three discourse communities

Salutation forms	CSs (Total of emails = 65) No. of emails with the form		ESSs (Total of emails = 60) No. of emails with the form		CESs (Total of emails = 62) No. of emails with the form	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1) Respected...	7	10.8%	0	0	0	0
2) Respected and dear...	3	4.6%	0	0	0	0
3) Dear + given name...	0	0	24	40.0%	21	33.9%
4) Dear + title + surname	0	0	3	5.0%	16	25.8%
5) Dear + full name	0	0	0	0	3	4.8%
6) Dear + title	0	0	0	0	4	6.5%
7) Hi/Hello/Hey + given name	0	0	31	51.7%	9	14.5%
8) Hi + Dear...	0	0	0	0	1	1.6%
9) Hi + ya	0	0	1	1.7%	0	0
10) Hi/Hello + title + surname	0	0	0	0	6	9.7%

Table 4.3. Greetings in the emails of members of three discourse communities

Greeting forms	CSs (Total of emails = 65) No. of emails with the form		ESSs (Total of emails = 60) No. of emails with the form		CESs (Total of emails = 62) No. of emails with the form	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1) Hello+ Honorary you in Chinese (Nin hao)	43	66.2%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2) Hello + you in Chinese (Ni hao)	9	13.8%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
3) How are you	N/A	N/A	0	0	6	9.7%
4) Other (Happy holidays! Hope you are well!)	1	1.5%	3	5.0%	0	0

While in the CESs' data, it was used more diversely with title + surname (25.8%) like Professor Smith, full name of the addressee (4.8%), titles of the addressees (6.5%) as well as with the addressee's given name (33.9%). In the CSs' data, some Chinese emails began with the salutation Respected... (10.8%) or Respected and dear.... (4.6 %).

Meanwhile, in the CSs' emails, it was found that greetings were used in 53 emails (81.5%) and the majority (66.2%) were realized with *Ninhao* (honorific you-well), which means "how are you?" in English. And some others (13.8%) were realized with *Nihao* (you-well). In Chinese, both nin and ni correspond to the pronoun you, which is used for addressing the hearer. However, nin has an honorific connotation, which is used by lower-ranked people to high-ranked people to show the speakers' respect. Ni in Chinese is usually used between equals or from high-ranked people to low-ranked people. For CESs' data, 6 emails (9.7%) contained *how are you?* greetings, which may be similar to Chinese emails with such greetings in the place after salutations and address terms. The English speakers did not use such greetings in their emails. Instead, 3 of them (5.0%) used more personalized and situational greetings like Happy holidays and Hope you are well.

3) Identifying Self

As for the self-introductory move of the opening, it was realized in three forms in the data. Some email writers could just tell the recipients their names like This is.... They could also introduce themselves with their name and some background information like This is your student.... Finally, some writers may give their background information without their names like I am one of B's Landscape MA students. The Chinese postgraduate students, no matter

whether they wrote emails in English or in Chinese, used the three forms of self-introduction more frequently than the English postgraduate students. Furthermore, the CESs introduced themselves more often than the CSs (32.2% vs. 26.2%). Among the three forms of self-introduction, both the CESs and the CSs preferred to introduce their names with their background information than to use the other two forms. In contrast, the ESs were much less inclined to introduce themselves in the openings of the emails. Only 3 of them (5.0%) introduced themselves with their sole background information. Table 4.4 further demonstrates the distributional forms of self-introduction in the emails of the three academic discourse communities.

4.2 Closings

The closing was composed of four moves: Looking forward to Reply, Thanks, Complimentary Closing, and Signing-off. The distributions of these moves of are detailed in Table 4.5.

As the table shows, the three communities of participants had different preferences for the closing moves. In general, the CESs were more inclined to use moves to conclude their emails politely than the other two discourse communities in respect to the number of three moves contained in their email. The ESs were less inclined to use these moves than the CESs but were more inclined to use them than the CSs. As for the part of signing off, nearly all the members in the three communities signed their names to end the emails. However, the CSs had some tendency to sign off the emails with the date, while members of the other two communities had no such tendency. In the following part, the specific choices of different moves are detailed.

Table 4.4. Distributional forms of self-introduction in the emails of the three discourse communities

Form of Self-introduction	CSs (Total of emails = 65) No. of emails with the form		ESs (Total of emails = 60) No. of emails with the form		CESs (Total of emails = 62) No. of emails with the form	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1) name only (This is xxx)	6	9.2%	0	0	5	8.1%
2) name & background Information	9	13.9%	0	0	10	16.1%
3)background information only	2	3.1%	3	5.0%	5	8.1%
4) emails without any self-introduction form	48	73.8%	57	95.0%	42	67.8%

Table 4.5. Distribution of closing options by members of the three discourse communities

	CSs (Total of emails = 65) No. of emails with the move		ESs (Total of emails = 60) No. of emails with the move		CESs (Total of emails = 62) No. of emails with the move	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Concluding politely						
1. Looking forward to reply	4	6.5%	3	5.0%	11	17.7%
2. Thanks	24	36.9%	32	53.3%	40	64.5%
3. Formulaic complimentary expressions	29	44.6%	39	65.0%	46	74.2%
Signing-off						
1. Signing off with name and person information	33	50.8%	3	5.0%	1	1.6%
2. Signing off with only name						
1) Full name	32	49.2%	8	13.3%	34	54.8%
2) Given name only	0	0	49	81.7%	27	43.5%
Signing off with the date	23	35.4%	0	0	1	1.6%

1) Looking forward to Reply

Following coding principles, it was found that not many emails of the three communities contained such move forms. Only four CSs' emails (6.5%) contained the move forms. The ESs' emails contained only 3 such move forms (5.0%). The CESs' emails had relatively more such move forms than those of the other two discourse communities. Eleven sentences (17.7%) were found to act as this move in the CESs' data.

2) Thanks

The move Thanks is used as a formulaic ending in the emails to show the writers' gratitude to recipients for the possible compliance of the request or reading the request email. It occurred in 24 CSs' emails (36.9%), 32 ESs' emails (53.3%) and 40 CESs' emails (64.5%). Among the three communities, the CESs expressed thanks more frequently than the other two, and the CSs expressed thanks least frequently.

The formulaic, routine expression of thanks in the Chinese email data is *xiexie* corresponding to English thanks. On the other hand, the routine expression (*many*) *thanks*, *thank you* and *cheers* appeared frequently in the ESs' and the CESs' data. The other kind of thanks, which explicitly expressed the reason of thanks, also occurred in the two groups of data frequently. These thanks often contained reasons like thanks a lot for your time, thanks a lot for the possible suggestions, and I'd be grateful for any help with this.

3) Complimentary Close

Complimentary Close refers to some good wishes or epistolary forms which the email writers used to give good wishes or compliments to the recipients. In Chinese emails, good wishes were expressed in a more detailed way than in the English data, like good wishes for recipients' health, work and holidays. In English emails, good wishes seemed to be conventionalized and were expressed in a general way like best wishes and best. On the other hand, the use of Complimentary Close in Chinese was very formal coming from Chinese formal written letters *cizhi* and *jingli*, which mean "stop here" and "salutation" in English. In the English emails, the complimentary close such as regards and (yours) sincerely were used regularly by both ESs and CESs. The distribution shows that the CESs (74.2%) tended to use this kind of move more frequently than the other two groups. The CSs group used this kind of move at the least (44.6%).

4) Signing off through writers' names with/without information and dates

All the emails were signed off with writers' names. However, the CSs' emails had two distinct features in signature in contrast with the ESs' emails. Half of the CSs' emails (50.8%) were signed with the writer's name and personal information such as the writer's academic department and their identity as students, while

only three ESs' emails (5.0%) were signed off like this. More specifically, in the CSs' emails, the writers always constructed this kind of move with the structure of "(your) student + name", which emphasized their students' identity. In the ESs' emails, the move was usually combined with the writer's name and their academic department. Furthermore, signatures in the CSs' emails were realized by the writers' full names, no matter whether the full names were signed with the personal information or independently or not. In contrast, in ESs' data, only 8 emails (13.3%) were signed with the full names of writers.

As for features of signature in the CESs' data, it seemed that the distributions fell between the CSs' and ESs' data. The Chinese English speakers seldom signed their names with their personal information in English emails (only one example was found). This performance was different from that in Chinese emails. However, in contrast to English speakers who preferred to sign their given names, more than half of the Chinese English speakers (54.8%) signed their full names to end the English emails.

Finally, 23 Chinese emails (35.4%) were found to be signed with the date. This kind of move was not found in the ESs' data and only one example was found in CESs' data.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study show considerable variation in the opening and closing of emails by the three discourse communities. While some different uses and forms in the openings and closings were found among the three discourse communities, some shared/similar practice was also found. These differences or similarities represent similar or different rapport management strategies each community employed in order to achieve request compliances. The differences and similarities are further discussed and interpreted in what follows.

5.1 The Observed Difference between the CS and ES Discourse Communities

In respect to the choices of address terms by the CSs and the ESs, it was shown that members of the CS discourse community predominantly used the formal address terms (title + last name) to address the recipients. This usage observes the "Chinese Address Maxim" [35], which stresses the use of appropriate titles to show respectfulness in communication. In Chinese

traditional culture which was mainly influenced by Confucianism, the teacher's status is very high [36]. Therefore, it is abnormal for Chinese people to use the given name of a higher-status addressee, even if they are very familiar with them and the individuals get along very well with each other. The address terms in these Chinese emails reflect a hierarchical relation between the email writers and the recipients.

As Scollon and Scollon [36] asserts, it is an independent strategy to address some people by their surnames and titles. The strategy is commonly used in the hierarchical system. The addressors tend to use this approach to recognize social differences and to put themselves into subordinate positions and the addressees into superordinate positions. Therefore, the Chinese postgraduates under study were inclined to attend the recipients' 'identity face'. [5] which acknowledge and uphold the teachers' quality face and social identities or roles. In addition, the 'identity face' was further enhanced by the use of salutations such as "respected" and "distinguished and dear" before the formal address forms in the CS discourse community.

Moreover, as Matsumoto [37] points out, honorific forms reflect an awareness of rank-ordering and acknowledge the superior-subordinate relationship between the participants in the interaction. In this study, members of the CS discourse community might use the honorific you to acknowledge the high-ranked position of the recipients and thus further attend to the 'identity face' of the recipients.

In contrast, in respect to the opening moves in the ES discourse community, the British postgraduate students did not often address the recipients in a formal way. They had a greater tendency to use informal address terms (dear/hi + given names) to address the email recipients. This may indicate the ESs might not attach the same importance to the recipients' identity face' as the Chinese postgraduate. Instead, they seemed to be more concerned with receiving fair treatment from the university instructors and thus shared a tendency to attend to their 'equity rights' [5]. When the university instructors' first name was selected, the email writers may have the view that the distance and status difference between the recipients and themselves might be reduced. Meanwhile, they may hope that their 'association rights' might be enhanced because the informal addresses tend to strengthen the solidarity between students and teachers.

Consequently, a relatively close and friendly relationship was likely to be built and maintained.

At the same time, concerning the salutation choice of *dear* and *hi*, both choices of dear and hi seemed to be common rapport strategies in English. More than half of the emails used hi/hello/hey as salutations. This might confirm that the English postgraduates were more inclined to attend their 'equity rights' in the openings of emails. On the other hand, other emails used dear as salutations, which might indicate that the writers preferred to show their deference to the recipients and to attend to the recipients' 'identity face' in the openings, or to see emails as similar to written letters.

The preference for formal forms by the CSs, together with the preference for informal forms by the ESs, was further confirmed by the moves of Introducing Oneself and Signing off in the two discourse communities respectively. As described earlier, two distinctive features in the stylistic domain of rapport management were found in the CS discourse community. In contrast to the ES discourse community, the CSs preferred more Introducing Oneself moves. In addition, they had a greater tendency to add the information of their student identity in the Signing off move.

These two distinctive features are more likely to serve rapport management than to convey the personal information of email writers. According to the survey, the CSs perceived a closer relationship with the recipients than the ESs did. In other words, most of the emails in the CS discourse community might not need to contain such moves as Introducing Oneself or students' personal information in the Signing off. Therefore, the possible interpretation for these two distinctive features might, in a way which is similar to addressing the recipients with the recipients' full name and title, lies in the fact that the writers hope to stress and consolidate the existing hierarchical power difference between the recipients and the writers themselves. This is, again, attributed to Confucian beliefs in China, which strongly emphasize the hierarchy of society [38,39].

However, when the writers were British postgraduates, they might have been more influenced by the predominant individualistic culture and thus might not attach a high importance to the power difference. Western culture assumes that "individuals must be

considered to be equal to each other" [36:110]. Therefore, the interactants in this discourse community might prefer to use involvement strategies to show solidarity and equality with each other. Corresponding to addressing the recipients with their given names, the British postgraduates tended to sign the emails with their given names only. The writers may have wished to use this involvement strategy to further consolidate the solidarity between the communication partners, which in turn is likely to reflect the egalitarian nature of western culture.

To sum up, the investigation of rapport-management strategies in the stylistic domain has supported the observation by Bjørge [40] that emails written by students from a high power distance (PD) culture embraced more formal openings and closings than those from low PD cultures. As Bjørge [40] concludes, email writers might choose the forms and complementary closings according to their judgement of their relationship to the recipients. In the current study, the email writers from the CS discourse community had a greater tendency to be formal in using moves in Openings and Closings. They might expect to use more independent politeness strategies to uphold the 'identity face' of the recipients and reduce the threat to the recipients' 'equity rights'. In contrast, the email writers from the ES discourse community had a greater preference for informality in openings and closings. They might be more inclined to use these involvement strategies to maintain their 'association rights' and 'equity rights'.

5.2 The Observed Divergence by the CES from the ESs

In respect to the choices of openings and closings by the members of the CES discourse communities, their linguistic performance diverts from those of the CSs and the ESs.

Regarding the moves of Identifying Self and Looking forward to Reply, the highest preference of the two moves on the part of the CESs might be due to a practical consideration from the email writers, who may have hoped the recipients might identify them easily. As found from the questionnaire, the CESs perceived that their relationship with the recipients was the most distant among the three discourse communities. This perception might lead to the CESs' strong need to use these two moves in their emails. However, the high preference for a Self-introduction move might also possibly be an

interlanguage-specific problem. As explored in previous chapters, the CSs seemed to be more inclined to use this move, even in emails written to their well-known teachers.

As regards the moves of Thanks and Complimentary Close, the fact that the CESs had a greater tendency to use these two moves might indicate that, similar to the preference for moves of Introducing Themselves and Looking forward to Reply, the CESs are more inclined to address the perceived high-distance relationship with the recipients.

Finally, regarding the fact that less than half of the CESs emails contained a formal address term (title or title + last name) to name the recipients. In contrast, more than half of the emails contained an informal address term (recipients' given names). This finding does not conform to Chen's [41] study that the entire Taiwanese students (Mandarin speakers) still observed the 'Chinese Address Maxims' [35], i.e., using a formal address term (title + last name) to address professors in their English emails. In contrast, the findings seem to indicate that more than half of the CESs could perform like the majority of the ESs to use recipients' first name to signify solidarity with university instructors. Consequently, the email writers' 'association rights' and 'equity rights' might well be addressed.

However, we cannot ignore that some CESs' emails (43.6%) still contained formal address terms, which might be like a small number of the ESs' emails to use the formal address terms as an independent strategy [36] to maintain the hierarchical face system. Therefore, the recipients' 'identity face' and 'equity rights' could be upheld. This observable fact might be, on the one hand, due to the possibility that the CESs still used them to primarily uphold the recipients' superordinate status. It might also be due to the possibility that some CESs still adhered to the 'Chinese Address Maxim', even though they were addressing the recipients of English speakers.

In a nutshell, the CESs had a greater tendency to use formal modes in openings and closings of emails than the ESs. This tendency seems to be transferred from Chinese socio-cultural norms, as even the CESs wrote emails to British university instructors. As investigated above, the CSs had a greater tendency to use formal address terms, formal salutations and formal

signings-off in the upward request emails. The tendency is argued to serve maintenance / upholding of the hierarchical face system against a high PD cultural background.

5.3 The Similarity among the Three Discourse Communities

Except the observed difference above, a strong similarity was also found in the ways in which the three discourse communities manage rapport through the performance of openings and closings. The similarities are also worthy to be highlighted and interpreted in what follows.

Firstly, the three discourse communities have a consistently prominent inclusion of moves of Openings and Signing off in their emails. This may indicate that all of them have a high tendency to follow "epistolary conventions in writing email to their professors, which suggests that they viewed email as more similar to conventional correspondence" [42:14]. For one thing, the emails in the three communities commonly started with address terms to salute the target addressee. At the same time, most of the email writers also adopted the convention of signing off with their own names. As for Virtanen and Maricic (2000), the email writers' significant tendency to sign their message suggests that they regard the move Signing off is an important form of rapport management, because the "signature is informationally superfluous in computer-mediated communications" [32:133] like emails. Also, the inclusion of the Signing off can make the requester more visible.

Furthermore, the three discourse communities shared a strong tendency to use moves of Thanks and Complimentary Close. This finding confirms those of previous similar studies [16,43]. Firstly, all the emails were composed for the purpose of requests. According to Spencer-Oatey [5], the speech act of request is a rapport-sensitive act and might be regarded as an imposition on the recipients. The move of showing gratitude may thus be preferred by the writers to "mitigate and compensate for the imposition" [11:15]. Secondly, as the emails were sent up the institutional hierarchy, the email writers might have wanted to show their deference and respect to the recipients with the use of these two moves. Furthermore, as Herring [43] points out, the use of the Thanks move in emails may demonstrate that the email writers want to adapt it to the email medium. In face-to-face interactions, speakers may get an

immediate response from hearers after they make a request and then the speakers will give thanks to the hearers, while in email interactions, the writers may realize the asynchrony in the communication process. They may then feel it necessary to show thanks to the recipients in advance, thus adjusting to the applied electronic technology.

Finally, considering in particular the similar practices presented in the emails by the CESs, it is clear that the CESs also observe the epistolary conventions in writing email to their instructors as well as the ESs. This finding contrasts with that of a similar study by Economidou-Kogetsidis [44], who found that the majority of Greek English learners did not put a greeting or closing in their request emails to professors. According to Economidou-Kogetsidis, the email structure without a greeting or a closing might be judged as inappropriate because it might increase coerciveness of the email message and lead these emails to be status-incongruent. In respect to this point, almost all the CESs' emails could be judged as appropriate because the inclusion of greetings and closings might help these emails to gain status congruence (i.e. emails written from low-status writers to high-status university instructors).

Several factors might contribute to the CESs' use of the same epistolary conventions followed by native English speakers. In the first, as discussed earlier, both the CSs and the ESs followed the same epistolary conventions in writing emails to the university instructors. Therefore, following either norms of proposing emails in Chinese and English would lead to the CESs' appropriate way of adding greetings and closings in the upward request emails. Secondly, as we know, all the CESs under study had relatively high proficiency of English. Moreover, all of them had been studying in Britain for at least half a year before the data collection process took place. Due to the high proficiency and the studying time in Britain, it is highly possible for the CESs to have acquired the epistolary conventions of emails as members from the ES discourse community.

Finally, the similarities in the emails among the three discourse communities might be attributed to the following factors. First, the three discourse communities shared a common goal oriented to academic request. Moreover, a subordinate-superior relationship exists between the email writers and the recipients. In addition, all the low-ranked members of the three discourse

communities showed, according to the results of questionnaires, that they wanted to manage a harmonious relationship with the high-ranked recipients. In other words, the goal of managing rapport plays a very important role in the emails if the writers seek to achieve 'request compliance' [22] and to make the discourse function effectively, efficiently and smoothly. As a result, it is usually necessary for members of the discourse communities to expend great discursive effort in managing rapport in emails.

6. CONCLUSION

The openings and closings play an important and effective role as linguistic resources in rapport management. From the research findings of this study, it is found that the choice, the presence and absence of the moves in the openings and closings of emails not only conveys an interpersonal message enabling the writers to manage rapport under the socio-cultural context and in turn, reflects the socio-culture. The study thus reveals and reconfirms that it is obligatory to consider cultural factors as well as sociolinguistic variables when interpreting how and why people make the linguistic choices [12].

Meanwhile, pattern difference in strategies of rapport management was identified in the emails by the CSs and the ESs. This finding gives further support to the claim by Spencer-Oatey [15:41] that "cultural differences in language use can have a major impact on people's assessments of appropriate language use, and hence rapport-management outcomes". The findings somewhat confirm stereotypical views from a culturally essentialist perspective, that national culture plays a key role in determining linguistic choices by different cultural groups.

The CESs' pattern tendency to choose rapport-management, however, might be, to some extent, an interlanguage-specific representation, though they had a relatively high English proficiency. The study thus has provided insights into some rapport-management flaws of Chinese students in their use of English in email message writing, which might lead to inappropriate linguistic behaviour in the cross-cultural communication. Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate and raise the rapport-management knowledge of EFL learners in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) pedagogy.

This study has also provided a number of theoretical, practical and real-world implications

for cross-cultural communication. Firstly, this study employs the theory of rapport management into genre studies. The research results have established that rapport management is a robust theory of communication that is able to provide reasons for similarities and differences in communication styles and cultural beliefs. It could facilitate our understanding of the complexities of communication. It is hoped that the results of this study will contribute to enhancing knowledge in the field of rapport management and electronic communication across cultures, and thus provide insights into cross-cultural and intercultural communication conventions.

However, the following limitation to this research needs to be listed. The participants in this study were limited to postgraduates and it is hence important to be aware that the findings in the current study might not be generalized to other social groups / discourse communities. The number of emails for analysis might be larger and the emails might not be limited to just one university from each culture. Moreover, this study was mainly involved with the openings and closings of emails in which the request was made, which may ignore other domains of rapport management especially such as illocutionary domain. Further research based in more rapport-management domains of emails, proposed by more participants and with more aims, needs to be carried out to determine the extent to which these findings hold for wider context and might be generalized.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire (The English version)

A Survey on Academic E-mail Requests

The survey consists of two parts. Part 1 is for collecting some of your personal information. Part 2 is for you to provide at least one academic email requests to academic staffs and answer the questions concerned with the email.

Part 1: Some personal information

[1] Your Nationality:

Next questions is to be answered by Chinese English speakers only.

[2] What is your English proficiency level now, according to you?
A. Beginner B. Intermediate C. Advanced (native or native-like)

Part 2 (For All Respondents)

I would like to use some of your academic e-mails for academic research. To help me accomplish this, please copy and paste the Recent One (at least) or Two Email Requests which you sent to an Academic Staff Member. Please also answer the 6th and 7th questions.

****Note:** Please do not include any confidential or personal e-mails.

[3] E-mail 1 Copy and paste the message content of your first e-mail here (please do not modify the message content at all).

[4]: How close would you say your relationship is with this recipient?

1 2 3 4 5
< -----not at all the closest ----->

[5]: Do you want to construct a good relationship with the recipient through this email? Please tick one: 1) YES 2) NO

*** Thanks a lot!***

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