



THE USE AND FORM OF GREETINGS IN WORKPLACE EMAILS

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Abstract

The closing years of the 20th century saw the introduction and widespread adoption of e-mail as a means of workplace communication. E-mails have replaced traditional letters and memos and have become the primary communication medium in many of today's workplaces. "It plays an important role in the transmission of information and, in general, in dealing with everyday administrative work". (Waldvogel, 2005). Just as in face-to-face communication, greetings and closings in emails have an important role to perform. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) note: "Greetings and farewells offer formulas to ease the strain created for face by the beginnings and ends of interactions" (p.138). This is very succinctly put forth by Waldvogel, 2007 (p.457) "Greeting is one of the means by which the writer makes his/her social and professional identity with the addressee(s). A closing can help consolidate the relationship and establish a relational basis for future encounters". The absence or presence of a greeting to a great degree affects the tone for the email conversation that follows. This study, which is part of a larger study, will report the findings on the use and form of greetings in the emails of two Indian workplaces: one educational organization, and the other, a Telecom company.

Introduction:

An investigation of the presence and absence of greetings and closings can provide insights into people's interpersonal interactions. Analysis of the types of greeting can also indicate people's relational practices at their workplaces. Having considered the discursive functions that email performs in the workplace and its role in the total communication of an organisation, this paper discusses some of the stylistic aspects of workplace email messages and explores how relational meaning is conveyed by email. Greetings form part of this study because of the important functions they perform in interpersonal interactions and because of what they reveal about people's relational practices. In this paper, the literature on greetings and closings, focussing particularly on emails, is discussed first. Then a discussion of the use of greetings in two workplaces is presented.

The Role of Greetings and Closings (sign-offs):

One of the norms of human behaviour is that people greet each other when they come into contact and exchange ritualistic words of closure when they part. Greetings and closings perform a valuable social role. Eckert and Mc-Connell-Ginet, describe this role as follows:

“Greetings and farewells offer formulas (sic) to ease the strain created for face by the beginnings and end of interactions” (138). This practice is evident in all kinds of spoken communication. For instance, Schegloff suggests that a telephone conversation begins with a series of ringing tones which summon the answerer to pick up the phone. The answerer typically initiates the beginning of the conversation by uttering a simple ‘hello’. Laver elaborates: “the function of the behavioural role that characterises the opening phase is to lubricate the transition from no interaction to interaction, and to ease the potentially awkward moments of the encounter before the main business of the encounter is embarked upon... the closing phase is once again a transitional phase, easing the transition from full interaction to departure” (218). Laver sees the closing as relevant to the participant’s need to establish a continuing consensus for further encounters and to consolidate the relationship experienced in the current interaction. Whereas the opening phase looks inwards to the coming interaction, the closing phase looks outward to the resumption of social life outside of the momentary relationship of the encounter. To a large extent, but not universally, these rituals of greeting and closure have been carried over into people’s email behaviour. Many emails begin with a greeting or some acknowledgement of the addressee and have some form of closure at the end.

Kankaanranta, in her study of email messages written in the lingua franca English by Finns and Swedes in a multinational corporation observes that salutations (greetings), closings and signatures contribute to social relations because they create a personal tone for the messages. She notes that the use of a salutation followed by first name in 80 percent of her emails was more frequent among non-native English speakers compared to native speakers and offers two reasons for this. The first reason is that because email originated from the American internal memo that contains no salutation, the American writers carried over this style into emails but the Swedish and Finnish writers did not. The second reason is that the writer “constructs a relationship with the recipient, and the usage thus contributes to the maintenance of good social relations” with the presence of salutations (Kankaanranta, 359). Kankaanranta’s study also suggests that the use of signatures and closings also gives a positive effect in building social relations.

In Ho’s study on request emails by a team of English lecturers in a Hong Kong public education institution, the leaders in this team used greetings and closings as a mechanism to build rapport with their subordinates. By addressing the recipient(s) directly, the leaders considered the interpersonal element. In addition, the use of greetings reduced the distance between themselves (the leaders) and their subordinates (the recipients) by getting them (the

subordinates) and by including a closing element, the leaders were seen as doing collegiality with their subordinates.

Roles of Greetings:

Greetings perform various functions. First, greetings are ways in which writers construct their relationship as well as their social and professional identities with their audience. Second, greetings “open communicative acts and set the tone for the exchanges that follow” (Wood & Kroger 145).

Greeting can take various forms. Greeting in English can involve a salutation of some sort and a term of address (or form of address). A salutation can be formal (i.e. ‘Dear’) or informal (i.e. ‘Hi’, ‘Hey’, ‘Hello’). Similarly a term of address can also be formal (i.e. title followed by last name or honorific epithets) or informal (i.e. first name only). In emails, writers may or may not include a greeting. And if a greeting is present, it may or may not include a salutation and it may or may not include a term of address. Greeting can take one of the following formats:

Informal term of address only (first name)

Informal salutation only (‘Hi’, ‘Hey’, ‘Hello’)

Informal salutation (‘Hi’, ‘Hey’, ‘Hello’) + informal term of address (first name)

Formal salutation (‘Dear’) + informal term of address (first name)

Formal salutation (‘Dear’) + formal term of address (title + last name or honorific epithets)

Morand defines forms of address as “how individuals name each other, for instance, by title/ last name (Ms. Smith) or first name (Jim)” (423). He explains that “while such forms [terms of address] comprise only brief moments of interaction; they are nevertheless critical events that are key to defining ensuing role orientations. Address forms signal and demarcate what types of emotional and interpersonal access two actors are to enjoy towards each other” (Morand, 423). In addition, Wood and Kroger claim that address forms “establish, at least initially, the relative power and distance of speaker and hearer”.

Laver (224) claims that the use of different categories of opening (greeting) is normally determined by the status of the two speakers involved in the interaction. In other words, status influences the greetings used. He suggests three levels of interaction: upward, downward and equal (Laver223). In an interaction between equals where a solidary relationship has been established, both interactants are free to choose the opening remark. In upward interactions, the subordinate may choose a formal greeting unless solidarity already existed. In contrast, in downward interactions, the superior can choose a greeting which signals formality or solidarity.

Alsree argues that “naming conventions are not only context-bound, they are also culture-bound”(217). In a typical English-speaking culture, the use of first name signals a positive politeness strategy while a more formal greeting, such as ‘title + last name’ indicates a negative politeness strategy which signals both power and social distance. A formal greeting such as ‘title + last name’ is usually used asymmetrically by a subordinate to a superior while the superior uses first name to address his/ her subordinates. In contrast, when formal greeting such as ‘title + last name’ or ‘title + first name’ is used in a symmetrical relationship, it indicates that the social distance and power is greater between the two interactants (Morand).

Alsree notes in her study, the longer the greeting form, the more formal it is, hence signalling greater social distance between interactants(148).Alsree suggests that while formal address forms can be determined by gender (Mr, Mrs, Ms and Miss), they can also be influenced by other factors such as “age (Master), relationship (uncle, grandfather), marital status (Mrs), religion (Bishop, Cardinal), status (Lord, His Excellency, Her Highness), profession (Lieutenant, Captain) and expertise (Professor, Doctor)”(145). Informal address terms such as terms of endearment or nicknames that are only used between close friends or colleagues are usually in-group identity markers (Wenger). In written communication, the convention for formal letters written in English is to include the word ‘Dear’ followed by the recipient’s title and last name (e.g. ‘Dear Mr. Y’) which is also evident in email messages. However, if the writer is an acquaintance of the recipient, the writer may dispense with the title and use only the first name instead of the last name (e.g. ‘Dear John’).

In the context of politeness theory, the choice of greeting often suggests the degree of distance or relationship between interactants. Levinson describes the choice of greeting as a “social deixis (since they encode) social distinctions that are relative to particular roles, particular aspects of the social relationships holding between speaker and hearer and some referent”(63). In email communication, it is the writer, the person who initiates the message, who sets the tone of the email exchange as well as the social relationship of the interaction through the linguistic choices s/he makes. In responding, the recipient can then choose to reciprocate the message by using the same type of greeting or to challenge the set tone.

Studies of email in different countries show that there is no a standard type of greeting used in business emails. Gimenez who studied 63 emails from an import-export company based in the UK notes that a range of greetings used in emails suggests a “more relaxed style when compared with the more rigid one in formal commercial letters”(245). He finds that the

writers' use of greetings range from no salutation to the more conventional 'dear + first name' or 'dear + title + last name'.

In his research, Rice (18) finds 59 instances (30%) of "personal greetings" in the sample of 200 email business memos he analysed. Nickerson who studied 100 emails from a large multinational corporation in the Netherlands notes that salutations were optional in email messages and were included only if the message was intended for a primary recipient. Gains examined 116 randomly selected emails in a commercial and an academic (university) context in the UK. He finds that 92 percent of the email exchanges in the commercial context did not include any greeting and 63 percent of the emails in the academic context began with some form of greeting.

In contrast, in Li's (2000b) study of non-native English speakers in Hong Kong, 95 percent of emails contained a greeting. In the Malaysian context, Abdullah and Alsree find that writers used a range of opening greetings which signal sensitivity to the status of the recipients and to the weight of imposition (Brown & Levinson). Alsree finds 114 occurrences of different address forms in her corpus of 141 email messages while Abdullah's study shows that more than 60 percent of all email messages had one salutation or combined salutations. Ho, who studied 115 emails in a public academic institution in Hong Kong, observes that greetings were used more frequently in downward request emails.

.The Use of Greetings in the Two Organisations:

The responses of those surveyed indicate that most people like a message to start with a greeting. At the educational organisation, two-thirds of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that it was important to start a message with a greeting; at the telecommunications organisation the figure was over seventy percent. Amongst the reasons given for this, politeness and respect for the other person were mentioned a number of times. Another reason given was that it personalises the message and by so doing helps it to achieve its objective. The general feeling was that it is nice if they are there but they are not essential. The following comments made by respondents at the telecommunications organisation are indicative of the attitude of most of those surveyed:

I don't mind [receiving a message without a greeting] but it doesn't sound quite so convivial. It would be nice. [to have a greeting]

Some people don't write greetings – you notice it you're just a bit surprised neither positively nor badly and think that's strange. Maybe they just don't have time or maybe that's just the way they do it.

Although both the greeting and the sign-off are superfluous in the sense that the format of the email means that the sender and receiver are known to each other, there seem to be two reasons why they are considered important:

- they provide a personal touch and a warmth that it is hard otherwise to inject into the email medium and in this way do some of the work of relationship building in an organisation.
- the type of greeting can also be used to send a message of distance, solidarity or expectation.

The absence or presence of a greeting and the type of greeting set the tone for the conversation that is to follow and can be used by the writer as a way of constructing his/her identity and relationship with the reader. The way in which a message opens very often conveys such information as the writer's personality, their status, their age, their gender and their mood at the time. In an email communication, it is the person initiating the message, the writer, who can be proactive in setting the social parameters of the interaction through the linguistic choices s/he makes as s/he has the first call. The reader, can, if responding, challenge and renegotiate these although this will already be somewhat from the back foot and reactively. In a spoken interaction, the 'working consensus' of the interaction (Goffman, qtd in Laver) is negotiated before the business starts, as both participants have the opportunity to tentatively explore the social identity and momentary state of mind of the other to define their own role in the rest of the interaction. According to politeness theory (Brown and Levinson) more formal terms of address show negative politeness or the desire not to impose on the reader, while more informal forms of address show solidarity. As Laver (224) says, the choice of term of address is normally governed by the status differential between the two speakers. Or, put in social constructionist terms, status influences the address terms used and the address terms contribute to the construction of status relationships. In a downward interaction, the acknowledged superior can choose to show either solidarity or formality. In an upward interaction, unless solidarity already exists between the two interlocutors, the acknowledged inferior may choose only formal terms of address.

In email communication, the absence of any greeting or name acknowledgement can be a linguistic habit, a mark of solidarity or a distancing device. While such an opening does nothing to facilitate the interaction, it is neither formal nor informal but simply suggests a "let's get down to business straightaway" approach. This may be either because the two parties involved in the interaction know each other well enough that they do not need to go

through the ritual of re-establishing their relationship or because the 'business' is seen as being of prime importance. The extent to which greetings and closings are used in email messages in the two workplaces is discussed first. There then follows an analysis of how greetings and closings contribute to the construction of such aspects of social identity as status, social distance and gender. The findings from the study of this one feature show that very different interactional patterns exist in the two workplaces.

Greetings in the Two Organisations:

As Table No. 4B.1 shows, the use of greetings differs greatly in the two organisations. In the educational organisation 59% of the messages began without any form of greeting while another 21% started simply with the person's name. While a high percentage of the messages were written by the two key people (see 3.3) and this could therefore be said to influence the findings, there was no consistency to the pattern of their greeting use. Sometimes they used greetings, sometimes they did not and when they did, they type of greeting used varied. Only 20 per cent of the messages did not contain any general greeting. The others had greetings. 'Dear' accompanied by 'sir', 'ma'am' or honorific with name, was the most often used (40 per cent). Two messages used the Indian address form, 'name+ ji'. 'Dear' accompanied by first name did not figure at all. An interesting greeting found at the educational organisation was 'respected' followed by 'sir' or 'ma'am'. Although, it was found in a very small per cent, just 2 per cent, it is representative of the Indian culture where status commands a great amount of respect. It could also be representative of the great respect accorded to teachers in the Indian culture. In the telecommunications organisation the most messages (58 per cent) began with a greeting word usually accompanied by the addressee's name (53 per cent). Another quarter began with a name only, while, quite like the educational organisation, only 17% began with neither a greeting nor a name. 'Hi' found in half of the messages, was the most popular greeting word. The second most favoured greeting word was 'Dear'. However, with only one exception, 'Dear' was used to start messages to a group. Eighteen per cent of the 44 messages addressed to a group began in this way. 'Good morning' was used twice, including once to a group.

Table 4B.1 Greeting Use in E-mail in Two Workplaces

| Greeting Type | Educational Organisation | | | Telecommunication Organisation | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|------|--------|--------------------------------|------|--------|
| | Total | Male | Female | Total | Male | Female |
| No Greeting | 59 | 65 | 49 | 17 | 16 | 16 |
| Greeting word only | 5 | 3 | 7 | 5 | 7 | 2 |
| First name only | 21 | 18 | 27 | 25 | 20 | 34 |
| Greeting word + first name | 15 | 13 | 17 | 53 | 57 | 47 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number | 394 | 243 | 151 | 121* | 75 | 44 |

While it might be thought that an initiation message would be more likely to have a greeting than a follow-up or response message, in both organizations, whether a message was initiatory or follow-up seemed to have no effect whatsoever. In the telecommunications organisation corpus, where two thirds of the messages were first or only communications on a topic, the percentage of messages having no greeting (17) was the same whether the message was an initiatory or sole message, part of an on-going dialogue or a response. However, as only 10 percent of the messages in this corpus were follow-up messages, the numbers are too small to be more than indicative. Sixty percent of initiatory messages contained a greeting word (7.5%) or a greeting word and a name (52.5%). This compares to 45% of the response messages. In these the greeting word was always accompanied by a name. With two exceptions the messages that did not have a greeting or acknowledge the sender fitted into one of four categories. They were either:

- a brief note accompanying an attachment
- a product update information message
- a response or follow-up message
- a message from the IT staff

Crystal also observed that between people who know each other, “greeting less messages are usually promptly sent responses, where the responder sees the message as the second part of a two-part interaction (an adjacency pair), for which an introductory greeting is inappropriate” (100). Over half of all these messages, however, contained some parting formula such as ‘Regards’, ‘Thanks’, ‘Thanks & Regards’. The two exceptions, mentioned above, were a quick query between close colleagues and a message to a group.

In the educational corpora, 161 (59%) of the messages were first or sole communications on a topic. The number of follow up messages (4%) was even smaller than for the manufacturing plant. Consequently the presence or absence of greetings in these messages is not of great significance. None of these response messages contained a greeting word. Approximately equal numbers of them started either baldly (six messages) or with the person's name only (five messages). Thirty-seven percent of the messages were responsive. A slightly higher percentage of these messages started baldly (66%) than those initiating a communication (59%). Eighty-seven per cent of responsive messages started either baldly or with just the person's name compared to 82% of first messages. The 20 messages to individuals started with a greeting word and or name, with one exception included all those which introduced a matter of a fairly delicate nature, made a major request of a higher status person or expressed appreciation for a major request granted. The one exception was a message where a higher status person was making an apology and explaining to one of his staff, an action that had been taken. In these situations, it would seem that the use of a greeting word and the person's name is deemed to show a greater level of respect and deference to the addressee.

Discussion:

The use of greetings to start email messages is much more a feature of the telecommunications organisation than the educational organisation and is possibly a reflection of the more friendly and familial culture of this organisation. It may also reflect what other data about the telecommunication organisation has shown, namely that people matter and that staff value each other. Symmetrical forms of address have been associated with solidarity (Brown and Gilman, qtd. in Tannen²⁶²). In the telecommunications organisation there was widespread use of the greeting form, 'Hi + name'. The lack of greetings in many of the emails collected from the educational organisation tends to suggest that this is a business first, people second culture and that there is less solidarity amongst the staff here. Many of the messages in this corpus were, however, brief administrative exchanges between people who were in quite frequent email correspondence. In terms of the presence or absence of greetings, the findings from the manufacturing plant are not dissimilar to those of Crystal (2001). Two-thirds of a sample of 500 emails from people, who knew him, contained an introductory greeting. However, in his study, 'Dear' was by far the most frequent individual greeting formula. Messages containing 'Dear' were twice as common as messages without 'Dear'. The most frequent greetings in order of frequency were:

- Dear+ name
- Name
- Hi+ name

Conclusion:

This analysis has demonstrated that even within two organizations in the same city, great variation exists in the use of greetings in work emails. Does the absence or presence of greetings in an organisation's emails then provide insights into its culture? The findings presented here tend to suggest that it does. Studies of the culture of the two organisations have shown that the telecommunications organisation has a culture where staff and management are more in harmony and supportive of each other than at the educational organisation. This is reflected in the patterns evident in their use of greetings. The much greater use of greetings at the telecommunications organisation suggests that its staff is concerned to establish a friendly tone in their interactions and maintain good interpersonal relationships. The informal terms of address used indicate strong feelings of solidarity. In the educational organisation, on the other hand, greetings and closings were used in only about 20% of the messages suggesting that more importance is placed on the message rather than how it is conveyed. Like many other linguistic tokens, greetings encode social information. This analysis has shown that in both organizations greetings and closings are used to construct colleagues as more or less worthy of respect and as more or less socially distant.

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