

Multilingual cyberpragmatics in instructional settings. Exploring gender and age effects in Catalan, Spanish and English email requests.

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ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on email communication in the multilingual university setting. Previous studies dealing with similar settings point to the lack of politeness markers in students' email messages (Bjorge, 2007), requests tend to be more direct and they may not match with the degree of imposition or social distance involved. Students' lack of *netetiquette* and the lack of physical presence on the Internet may influence their pragmatic behavior. In addition to that, other studies (Barón and Ortega, 2018) point to age effects and further confirm the preference for direct pragmatic forms. Nevertheless, very few studies have adopted a multilingual perspective.

For this reason, we have examined 250 email requests to faculty. Openings and requests produced in Catalan, Spanish or English were analyzed. Our main goal was to confirm whether students' requests would devoid politeness markers and whether openings would show a lack of *netetiquette*. We were also interested in identifying age and gender effects and in finding out if the pragmatic forms chosen would be in line with the politeness orientation of the language involved. Results are in line with previous studies but they also contradict them adding interesting information on the way multilingualism is displayed in email interaction.

Keywords: email requests, multilingual pragmatics, gender and age in L2/L3 emails, third language learners and users

Introduction

In a recent overview of data trends in pragmatics, Culpeper and Gillings (2019) argue for the need of more research on written data. This study aims to contribute to such need by focusing on email requests to faculty members in the university setting. However, email communication is described as a hybrid medium (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018) including characteristics of written and oral language.

According to Yus (2011), who coined the term cyberpragmatics, these oralised written texts present features illustrating aspects of written and oral communication. The actual format is written and it is an asynchronous virtual medium. Yet, it is also dynamic, interactive and ephemeral (Danet, 2001) like oral face-to-face encounters. In fact, the time of response to an email is assumed to be short. Escribano-Otero (1998) points out some tips of *netiquette* (i.e. politeness on the net) for emails which refer to the avoidance of

excessively formal address forms, the use of more informal language and a preference for brief and concise messages.

Regarding emails in academia, Chen (2015) describes some structural essentials of requests to professors as follows. Emails are expected to include two main parts, the content and the framing (Kankaanranta, 2006); and this last component is made of a subject line, opening and closing. For the purposes of the present paper, we shall focus on the content and the opening subparts as they include information about the social distance among addresser and addressee and the extent to which such relationship may affect the forms chosen to make the request. The relation between these two parts has been previously examined (Félix-Brasdefer, 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011, 2018), and the present study may contribute to this line of research in two ways: (i) by examining age and gender as individual variables and (ii) by adopting a multilingual perspective.

Therefore, the aim this paper entails the analysis of the pragmalinguistic choices and sociopragmatic conditions underlying email requests to professors. Bearing this purpose in mind, previous research on the openings and content subparts of email requests to professors is considered and special attention is paid to studies including age or gender effects follows.

Previous research on email openings

As mentioned before, email openings provide us with information about the social relation between the sender and the recipient of the message. The opening subpart performs an interactional function (Brown and Yule, 1983), it is realized by greetings which are also termed forms of address, and it is empty of content but interpersonally loaded as raised by some authors (Bou-Franch, 2006, 2011; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). The choice of the form of address may be decided by how correspondents perceive their relationship. Therefore, students' perception of their relationship may not coincide with how professors perceive it. Although some authors point out a certain degree of variation regarding social distance in the classroom context (Bjorge, 2007), many research studies highlight the fact that student-professor relationship is hierarchical and unequal (Economidou-Kogetsidis et al, 2021). In this sense, students are expected to use status-congruent language (Biesenbach -Lucas, 2007) because an inappropriate form of address may cause misjudgment and violate social appropriateness (Bjorge, 2007). Nevertheless, former research shows a great deal of pragmalinguistic variation in students' email openings (Bou-Franch, 2011; Félix-Brasdefer, 2012).

Previous studies have analysed email openings (Bjorge, 2007; Bou-Franch, 2011; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011, 2018; Schauer, 2021) in different cultural contexts namely those of Norway, Cyprus, Spain or US. Bjorge (2007) analysed international students in Norway. The author distinguishes between high power and low power distance cultures (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Such distinction refers to the educational system in specific countries and teachers' role in it. High power distance countries are those ones where education is teacher-centred, teachers are not expected to be criticized and students are not expected to speak in class. Low power countries include Britain, USA or Germany whereas high power cultures involve Spain. Results from Bjorge's analysis showed that lower power distance cultures favoured informal greetings,

while higher power distance cultures showed some trend for formal openings. Yet, informal openings were also used in this second cultural group including high power distance settings. This finding might be related to the criteria used by Bjorge (2007) in ascertaining whether a given context could be characterized as high or low power. Such distinction presents two main issues. On the one hand, we cannot ignore neither the multicultural nature of many countries nor the fact that education changes along time. For instance, Spain is no longer a teacher-centred system and students are encouraged to speak in class and take part in collaborative learning tasks.

Bou-Franch (2011) also examines email openings with a different focus. The author follows a discourse and conversational analysis framework in her data including 50 email conversations involving professors and 50 email conversations between students and professors. Unlike the case of other studies, the sequence of email exchanges are the focus of this piece of research. Interestingly, Bou-Franch reports a modification of the initial unequal power relationship in line with the virtual interaction. The co-construction and dynamism of sender and receiver roles in email communication could have influenced the variation of forms found in the opening part of the examined email messages. As it could be expected, results of these analyses show clear differences between equal (i.e. professor-professor) and unequal (i.e. student-professor) exchanges. Yet, the author points to the highly socially interactive style, the importance of maintaining social relationships in the community of practice, and a global preference for informal forms of address. This would be in line with the politeness orientation of Spanish and Catalan languages, which points to the social acceptance as priority before having one's own territory unimpeded (the case of English language orientation). Similarly, recent studies conducted in Spain (Codina-Espurz; 2021; Salazar-Campillo, 2018; Salazar-Campillo and Codina-Espurz, 2019) illustrate learners' tendency to use informal openings that include a greeting expression together with the professor's name.

In another Southern European context, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011, 2018) examines 200 English email requests written by Greek EFL university students. Openings were distributed in three groups involving formal (e.g. Dear Prof. X), informal (e.g. Dear 'name') and no salutation types or greeting without name (e.g. Hi). Results show students' preference for formal forms of address (e.g. Dear Prof. or Prof) in the messages addressing professors although there's a great deal of variation also found in previous studies (Formentelli, 2009). The author also indicates there might have been cases of transfer from Greek.

The role of the learners' L1 is taken into account in Schauer's (2021) contrastive longitudinal research. This author examines email openings in German (L1) and English (L2). Data consisted of 65 English and 61 German emails written by 17 German students of English and American Studies at a German University. The addressee was the actual author of this investigation who compiled these emails over a two-year period. The analyses revealed a preference for formal salutation both in English and German. Yet, as the author explains, there was greater variation in German with different combinations containing formal salutation + gender title + academic title. Interestingly, students seemed to transfer from German greeting norms into English openings that included combinations of gender and academic titles. Schauer also highlights the importance of examining individual data and raises the need for more instruction on the use of address terms, in

particular, and pragmatics in general. The need for further training on email writing has also been raised by scholars examining the content of email request forms as follows.

Studies on the content of email requests

As has already been mentioned, the content of the email request includes the actual purpose of the message and the intentional goal of the sender. It thus performs a transactional function (Brown and Yule, 1983), and it is realized by request strategies and accompanying peripheral modification items. Research on this aspect may be subdivided into two groups as follows. Some studies have contrasted native and nonnative speakers' emails (Alcón, 2013; Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch, 2013) and others have examined students' messages in L2 English (Kogetsidis, 2011; 2018; Codina-Espurz, 2021; Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo, 2019). This second subgroup includes some exceptional cases which have considered more than one language in their analysis of email requestive behavior (Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo, 2019).

Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), Alcón (2013) and Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch, (2013) compare email requests produced by native and non-native speakers of English in USA, Britain and Spain. Biesenbach-Lucas examined 533 email requests sent by Asian background students and native speakers of English in USA. Her data show that both subject groups use direct and conventionally indirect request forms. However, students resort more often to external than internal modification items while the opposite occurs in the case of native speakers. Similarly, results from Alcón's study (2013) showed that internal modification items were more frequent in native speakers' messages, while international students resorted to external modifiers in mitigating the impositive nature of their requests. Email communication in this study was part of a pedagogical task involving British and international students in England. Hence, data were retrieved in a short period of time.

Focusing on naturalistic data, Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch (2013) found that L2 English students in Spain used more direct request forms than L1 English speakers in England, who resorted to indirect request forms. As argued by these authors, direct requests employed by Spanish learners may illustrate their L1 sociocultural background. A preference for direct request strategies is also found in Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2011, 2018, 2021) studies. As mentioned in the previous subsection, this author examines 200 email requests and she focuses on both forms of address and content. Regarding the content of the email request, results point to a preference for direct forms (63%) including imperatives, direct questions and want statements, followed by conventionally indirect forms (32,2%) and finally hints (2,7%). Coinciding with aforementioned studies (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Alcón, 2013), students hardly ever modified their requests. There were cases where external modifiers were employed, more specifically grounders and the particle please. Sometimes, students used intensifiers although this was not a frequent pattern. Interestingly, this author attributes their performance to what students feel is their rights and obligations, that is, their perceptions as customers within the university setting. She also relates her findings to the age of students, as they may be considered native digitals and sometimes use their own smartphones to write the messages. This fact may help perceive email messaging as another platform for short

instant messaging. An aspect that has been the focus of research on cyberpragmatics (Yus, 2016, 2021).

Contrary to this informal trend, Codina-Espurz's (2021) analysis of 60 elicited emails in L2 English revealed learners' preference for conventionally indirect request forms. As the author suggests, these results may show the effect of the data collection technique. In fact, studies including pedagogical intervention (Nguyen, 2019; Uso-Juan, 2021, 2022) show the positive effects of explicit strategy instruction in email writing.

As has been previously mentioned, time in replying may be seen as face threatening on the part of professors but natural for students as shown in Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo's study (2019). These authors examine not only English but emails written in Spanish and Catalan. Data were collected in the same setting as the present study which is located in a Catalan/Spanish speaking community in Eastern Spain and where English is the medium of communication and also the students L3. These authors examined 90 email messages written by students and prospective students to MA coordinators. As described by these authors, eighty per cent of their data include requests for information. Findings show that the politeness orientation of each language had no effects on the request strategy chosen by students as they resorted to direct request forms in all three languages involved. As in previous studies, the data show a clear preference for direct forms including unmitigated direct questions. There are few instances of peripheral modification items accompanying the request forms although the authors only considered internal modification items in their analysis and they examine the grammatical and formal structures of requests. Yet, their results confirm previous research involving students and non-native speakers of English (Alcón, 2013). These findings in Spanish email requests to professors are in line with Felix-Brasdefer's study (2012) which also points to a preference for direct forms if the level of imposition is low and indirect ones if it's high. Yet, we should consider that in the case of Félix -Brasdefer's data it was not peninsular Spanish and the sociocultural context differed from the one in Codina-Espurz and Campillo-Salazar (2019).

Age and gender variables in L2 email requests

Gonzalez-Lloret (2022) raises the need to consider individual differences when examining learners' online pragmatic performance. As argued by this author, many learner variables are underexplored but they may influence their interaction with technology. On that account, the present study considers the role of age and gender in email requesting.

Few studies take into account the effect of age in writing L2 email requests although university students have been identified as native digitals, and some authors attribute their directness and informality to their use of smartphones in writing emails to professors (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2021). This variable is examined in Barón and Ortega's (2018) study which took place in Catalonia. Like our setting, it is a Catalan-Spanish speaking context located in Eastern Spain. Data comprised 80 email messages which were obtained from students' participation in a pedagogical task. Participants were native and non-native speakers of English and they were grouped according to their age and L1, that is, whether

they were native or non-native speakers of English and in their twenties or thirties. As in previous studies, results show that non-native speakers are more direct and informal than their native speakers' counterparts. Furthermore, no differences were found between younger and older native speakers, although age differences could be reported within the two non-native speaker groups. Younger English learners in their twenties were more informal and direct and their older counterparts who were within the 30 to 40 age range. As reported by the authors, these findings are in line with other studies tackling the pragmatics of learners from similar ages (Marriott, 1995) but still further research is needed that further examines the effect of this individual variable in email writing.

As it was the case of the age factor, we are not aware of many studies dealing with gender and L2/L3 email requests. Yet, existing studies examining male and female learners' use of requests (Tajeddin and Malmir, 2014; Esfahlan and Boroumand, 2020) in DCTs report no significant differences in their performance although the authors raise the need for further research. As argued by Kasper and Rose (2002) members of specific gender groups develop their interlanguage pragmatic knowledge based on the social, cultural and situational roles of L2 context. Furthermore, as acknowledged by Ogiermann (2009) and Tajeddin and Malmir (2014), the fact that learners identify oneself as male or female might relate to specific social positions and patterns of interaction in L1 and L2.

Felix-Brasdefer's (2012) study is an example of varying patterns in email request openings. The author reports gender differences in the use of specific types of greetings. His study focuses on US students' email requests openings in 320 messages sent to professors in L2 Spanish (200 messages) and L1 English (100 messages). Results show wide variation in the 11 types of opening moves which included greetings, greeting + title, title + name of the professor, greeting + title + name of the professors, among other combinations. In the case of Spanish emails, greeting 'Hola' was the most frequently form employed (65%), while in the case of English openings, this greeting 'Hello' was also present but used with less frequency (27%). However, it should be noted that these greetings appeared in combination with titles, and names and with unequal frequencies of use, thus, resulting in a wide range of variation as mentioned above. According to Felix-Brasdefer, female learners are expected to be more polite and indirect (Herring, 2000) and his data reveal more variation in the case of female learners' performance while male participants resorted to one type, that of the use of greetings without titles or names accompanying them. These findings are in line with other studies that highlight women's trend to use more greetings than men (Holmes, 1995; Waldvogel's, 2007).

Unlike the above-mentioned studies, no significant gender differences are found in Pham and Yeh's study (2022). These authors examine the content of the request form in 42 Vietnamese EFL learners' email requests to Faculty. According to the authors, the use of direct requests was higher than that of conventionally indirect forms although both forms were extensively employed. Regarding the gender of participants, the authors do not signal out any significant differences but they signal out female participants' tendency to use more conventionally indirect forms and males' preference for imperatives and indirect strategies. Please was overused and this could be due to the influence of Vietnamese politeness rules.

In virtue of the research quoted above, we may state that there seem to be inconclusive findings regarding the role of gender in email requesting. Furthermore, there is a need for more studies considering these variables and adopting a multilingual perspective. In fact, according to Calafato (2021) gender is a rarely examined area in multilingualism research although Pavlenko and Piller (2008) claim that one of the most promising areas of future study is that of gender performance in multilingual contexts. On that account, we have considered the analysis of gender and age as dependent variables and adopted a multilingual approach in the present study.

Summing up previous research on L2/L3 email requests we may state that:

- Students choose a variety of forms of address ranging from more informal to more formal
- Catalan-Spanish speakers show a preference for informal forms of address in L3 English
- Greek and German learners of English show a preference for formal salutation and forms of address.
- Non-native speakers of English & students show a preference for direct forms, including imperatives, blunt questions and want statements
- Students resort more often to external than to internal modification items
- Non-native speakers of English in Spain are more informal than native speakers
- Tasks including L2 email writing elicit the use of conventionally indirect forms
- Age may influence the form chosen in email requests being younger learners more informal than older ones.
- Gender differences are inconclusive as not all studies report clear significant differences. Yet, findings so far relate to more variation, indirect and mitigated behavior on the part of female participants.
- Preference for direct and unmodified request strategies is present across languages irrespective of their politeness orientation.

Considering previous findings, the following research questions have been formulated.

RQ1: To what extent do learners' email requests show netiquette and status congruence?

RQ2: What is the role of age and gender of participants in the email requests analysed?

RQ3: Are requests in English more indirect than in Catalan and/or Spanish? Do these illustrate the politeness orientation of each language?

Method

Naturalistic data including 250 email requests to one university professor and author of the present study were analyzed. These email requests were written in Catalan (n= 75), Spanish (n=75) and English (n= 100) and senders included 50 BA and 50 MA students. All participants held an advanced level of English according to their written and oral performance in the BA and MA courses in which they were engaged. For this reason, we shall refer to participants either as students, learners or senders. For the purposes of our

analysis, senders' age and gender were taken into account and their email messages were distributed into subgroups accordingly.

INSERT TABLE 1

These email requests were compiled during a two-year period by the author of this research study as in Schauer's research (2021). Senders received an autoreply message stating that their message might be used for research purposes and that personal information would remain anonymous and confidential. Participants were then given the chance to reject taking part in the study or accept provided the data and information on their messages was not shared or made accessible.

In order to examine our data, the following taxonomies that have been adopted and adapted from previous research were employed. In the case of email openings, data were coded according to four categories in the three languages involved: (i) Dear/Querida/benvolguda + academic title + name + surname, (ii) omission of dear/querida/benvolguda, academic title + name + surname, (iii) informal greeting Hi or Hello/Hola + name, (iv) no opening. Table 2 below may best show the types of opening forms found in the data.

INSERT TABLE 2

Regarding the request formulas chosen for the content of the message, data were coded according to Trosborg's (1995) typology of request head act forms and Alcón et al. (2005) taxonomy of peripheral modification items. These taxonomies were chosen as they have been employed in a number of studies dealing with L3 participants from the same multilingual sociolinguistic setting (see Alcón, 2008 for a review).

INSERT TABLE 3

INSERT TABLE 4

Quantitative analyses of our data involve the use of non-parametric tests as data significantly deviate from normal distribution according to Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results, and we were also interested in data distribution (Vanhove, 2020). More specifically, Mann Whitney U tests, Wilcoxon, Friedman and Spearman correlation tests were employed in identifying statistically significant findings.

Results & Discussion

Status-congruence of email requests. Opening forms and request realizations.

The first research question guiding our study refers to the extent to which social distance between professor and students is illustrated in learners' email requests. In order to provide an answer, we have examined email openings, request forms and modification devices employed. Regarding opening types, informal forms of address (78%) were more often employed than formal ones (22%). More specifically, informal greeting + name was the opening subtype that learners resorted to more frequently as shown in Figure 1 below.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Results from the Friedman test show that these differences in distribution of opening forms are statistically significant ($\chi^2(5)=80.32, p = 0.0001$) (see Table 5).

INSERT TABLE 5

These results are in line with previous findings from similar sociolinguistic settings (Bou-Franch, 2011; Codina-Espurz, 2021; Salazar-Campillo, 2018; Salazar-Campillo and Codina-Espurz, 2019) but different from other European educational contexts, like Cyprus (Economidou-Koetsidis, 2011, 2018) or Germany (Schauer, 2021) which point out a higher degree of formality in the opening formulas chosen. Unlike reported by Bjorge (2007), Spain social distance is not as high as it used to be some 20 years ago.

Regarding the pragmalinguistic form employed for conveying the content of the email requests, it seems that our findings are in line with previous studies from IL pragmatics (Alcón-Soler, 2015; Economidou-Koetsidis, 2018, 2021). Learners in general used direct request forms (54%) more often than conventionally indirect (41%) or hints (5%), being such differences statistically significant according to Friedman Test results (see Table 6).

INSERT FIGURE 2

INSERT TABLE 6

Nevertheless, we may observe that conventionally indirect requestive behavior was also quite frequent accounting for over forty per cent of the sample data. Regarding specific strategy types, direct performative is the most frequently used form (46%) followed by conventionally indirect wish (26%) as illustrated in examples 1 and 2.

Example 1

(S34 – male – 24 years old)

Dear Pilar,

I send you my learning report for you to read. I want to ask you if I could come tomorrow to your office.

Example 2

(S66 – female – 22 years old)

Dear Pilar

I would like to ask you whether I can send you the papers within the same envelop.

Concerning modification items, learners showed a high preference for external modifiers accounting for 76% of the total use, while internal modification items appear in 24% of the cases examined (see Figure 3 below). Within each modification subtype, preparators were highly used (44.35%) in students' email requests followed by grounders (17.13%), disarmers (16.13%), softeners (12.9%) and attention getters (10.8%). Other peripheral modification items are less present in our data (< 10 %). Results from the Friedman test ($\chi^2(1) = 32.05, p = 0.000$) report that the difference in the distribution of modifiers production is statistically significant.

INSERT FIGURE 3

Previous studies also confirm this preference for external modification items (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Alcón, 2013). Unlike studies conducted in other Southern-European contexts (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018, 2021), our data include modifiers in all email requests. As argued by Economidou-Kogetsidis, the fact that her subjects produced unmitigated requests maybe due to what students perceive as their rights which also relates to the nature of the request. Other authors refer to the degree of social distance between professor and students in specific settings (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005; Bjorge, 2007) as an important influence in the choice of particular request forms. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fact that email communication is supposed to be more direct, concise and simple (Escribano-Otero, 1998) in line with netiquette parameters.

This last aspect could also explain why our findings do not seem to indicate a complete unequal and hierarchical relationship between addresser (students) and addressee (professor). In line with previous studies from the IL Pragmatics subfield, our learners resorted more often to informal opening forms, they employed direct request strategies and these last ones were modified externally. Yet, some degree of variation was also found in our data and this calls for further analysis considering the role that specific individual variables might have played.

Age and gender effects in the use of opening forms, request strategies and modification items.

As far as opening forms are concerned, no gender or age effects have been found. Both female and male students, younger and older participants produced similar opening forms in line with results reported above. Notwithstanding, differences between these learners' subgroups have been found regarding the use of request pragmalinguistic forms and modifiers which are described as follows.

INSERT FIGURE 4

As Figure 4 above shows, both male and female learners resorted to direct and indirect forms in similar ways, however, conventionally indirect forms were more often used by male than female participants, and such difference is statistically significant according to the MannWhitney U test results ($U = 947.5$; $W = 2838.5$; $Z = -1.9$) ($p < 0.05$).

INSERT FIGURE 5

Considering the modification items accompanying the request forms (see figure 5 above), results show female learners' preference for external modifiers including preparators, disarmers, please and attention getters, while male learners resorted to intensifiers more often. These differences according to the Mann-Whitney U test are significant ($U = 958.5$; $W = 1738.5$; $Z = -2.105$) ($p < 0.05$) and they illustrate different patterns in email requesting. Female students mitigate more the impositive nature of their direct requests in a number of ways while male learners opt for using an appropriate form that may turn inappropriate if accompanied by intensifiers. Hence, while showing some awareness on the threatening nature of a request, they also refer to the urgency or importance of their demands as illustrated in examples 3 and 4 below.

Example 3

(S63 - female - 32+)

Good afternoon,

I am SS, I write to you to inform you that I sent all my assignments last Tuesday, day 24th. They may have arrived, please **let me know when that happens**. Thank you.

Example 4

(S79 – male – 32+)

Hi Pilar,

Find attached my draft paper. Could you have a look at the research questions and the purpose of the study? The paper still needs to be restructured. I have also included the results.

Reply today!

On the one hand, example 3 above shows a direct request move (i.e. let me know when that happens) which is accompanied by several modification items, namely those of opener (I am SS), preparator (i.e. I write to you to inform you that I sent all my assignments last Tuesday, day 24th) and please. The use of these external modifiers mitigates the threatening nature of the direct request form. Therefore, while the form used may seem inaccurate, the combination of request form and modifiers makes this an appropriate choice. On the other hand, example 4 includes a conventionally indirect form (i.e. could you have a look ...?) and external modifiers (i.e. find attached my draft paper) which may illustrate appropriate pragmatic behavior. However, these appropriate forms are followed by an intensifier (i.e. Reply today!) that results in a violation of netiquette on the part of this male learner. Unlike previous studies (Felix-Brasdefer, 2012), our female learners use more direct forms than male participants who resort to conventionally indirect requests. Yet, female students use more downgraders and male learners' emails include intensifiers. Interestingly, we have thus found different requestive patterns in each gender subgroup that bear partial coincidence with those expectations deriving from former studies (Pham and Yeh, 2022). While male senders use more indirect strategies in requesting, they add intensifiers neutralizing the downgrading effect included in the choice of appropriate request forms. Email request forms sent by female students were mitigated, preparators were highly used but direct forms were preferred to indirect ones. Yet, as mentioned above, this resulted in a more appropriate requestive behavior than that of the male subgroup.

Regarding age, results point to an increase in the use of both direct and conventionally indirect forms on the part of older learners, while younger ones also resort to indirect hints (see figure 6 below). This last practice would certainly seem inappropriate for requesting between unequal interlocutors (i.e. student to professor). Despite these reported differences, statistical tests did not reveal significance levels on students' global performance. However, a focus on the Catalan language leads to age effects concerning the use of conventionally indirect strategies. In fact, older students employed speaker-oriented forms (i.e. wish) more often than younger ones in Catalan and this difference ($U = 926$, $W = 3137$, $Z = -2.5$; $p < 0.05$) is statistically significant according to results from Mann-Whitney U Test.

INSERT FIGURE 6

As illustrated in Figure 6 above, it seems that younger learners related to hearer-oriented strategies of the type of *Could You? Would You?* while older learners preferred speaker-

oriented ones such as *I would like to enquire* which also imply higher interest in face saving manners. Example 5 below illustrates the use of hearer-oriented request form (i.e. *volia saber quan ...* - I'd like to know when ...) by a student from the older group (30+). In example 6 below, we may see how a younger student (18+) chose a hearer-oriented form (i.e. *Podrias revisar el listado?* - Could you check the list?).

Example 5

(S2 – female – 30+)

Hola Pilar,

Demà acabo les pràctiques i volia saber quan hauria d'entregar la memoria i si el questionari de la supervisora també tinc que enviar jo

Salutacions

Example 6

(S32 – female – 18+)

Buenas,

No tengo nota de examen. Podrías revisar el listado? La necesito hoy o cuanto antes. Muchas gracias.

Senders' age also seemed to play a role in the use of modification items accompanying the request forms (see figure 7 below). Older senders used more modification items, particularly preparators and softeners, while younger students' emails denote a slight increase in the use of intensifiers. Differences are statistically significant regarding the global modification (U=871; W=3082; Z= -2.11; p<0.05) and the use of external modifiers (U=834; W=3045; Z= -2,39; p<0.05), which were higher in the older group of participants.

INSERT FIGURE 7

The difference between the two age groups is in line with our results reported above which refer to the use of conventionally indirect forms. The few modifiers or even presence of intensifiers denotes a lack of netiquette on the part of younger learners. This finding coincides with previous studies (Barón and Ortega, 2018; Marriott, 1995) that show how younger English learners are more informal and direct than older students. Such difference could be due to the fact that as native digitals (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018) they use their smartphones to send emails and thus short messaging style influences their requests.

Therefore, in light of our results reported above, we may state that both age and gender played a role in the pragmalinguistic choices of the students. Although no influence could

be identified regarding the opening frames, the content subpart varied in terms of age and gender of the sender. Younger students used direct and hearer-oriented requests and sometimes aggravated their messages including intensifiers, while older senders showed a preference for mitigated speaker-oriented request forms. Female students used more direct requests that were downgraded accordingly with internal and external modification items, whereas their male counterparts resorted to conventionally indirect requests and intensifiers. We believe that findings may contribute to research on L2/L3 email requests as differences are found between the female and male groups. Statistical significance has been identified in cases in which attention has been given to particular languages (see Figure 6 above). In fact, a multilingual approach may help broaden the scope of email analysis and this is the focus of the following subsection.

Netiquette in English, Spanish and Catalan email requests

Our third research question considered whether Email requests in English would be more indirect than in Catalan and/or Spanish, and the extent to which these email requests would illustrate the politeness orientation of each language. In order to provide an answer to this third research question, we have compared opening types, email request forms and modifiers in English, Spanish and Catalan.

Regarding the opening forms employed, we may state that findings highlight the politeness orientation of each language involved. As shown in figure 8 below, while there's a preference for informal greetings in Spanish and Catalan (e.g. *Hola*), formal greeting plus name is more often employed in English (e.g. Dear Pilar). In fact, English formal greeting correlates (r_s -0,232) with Spanish and Catalan informal one (r_s -0,205) according to the Spearman test results ($p < 0.05$). Previous studies conducted in the same sociolinguistic setting (Codina-Espurz; 2021; Salazar-Campillo, 2018; Salazar-Campillo and Codina-Espurz, 2019), point out Catalan-Spanish speakers' preference for informal forms of address. Contrarily, our data shows that formal address forms are included in our English email data which raises participants' awareness on what is pragmatically appropriate in their third language. While authors from previous studies attribute the use of informal forms of address in L3 English to transfer from L1 and L2 sociocultural norms, we may state that our findings show participants' knowledge about the politeness orientation of each language involved in the email requests.

INSERT FIGURE 8

As far as the request forms chosen for the content of the email message are concerned, we may see how the politeness orientation of each language seems to determine the strategy employed. As illustrated in Figure 9 below, direct forms are widely used in Spanish, while a preference for conventionally indirect forms in English is also identified in our findings. These differences are statistically significant according to the Friedman test results ($\chi^2(8) = 46.33$; $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, English conventional indirectness correlates with the use of Catalan and Spanish direct request forms (r_s 0.233) according to the Spearman test results.

INSERT FIGURE 9

Examples that highlight the above reported differences between the three languages may be found as follows.

Example 7

(S4 –female – 18+)

Bones (informal),

Els dos articles que hem de redactar per aquella assignatura (preparator), **els redactem com a tasques independents**, o cal que formen part d'un mateix paper? (direct-blunt question).

Example 8

(S21-male- 18+)

Hola (informal),

¿Te ha dado tiempo dar el visto bueno? (direct-blunt question) **Es para enviarlo ya mañana** (intensifier/grounder).

Example 9

(S75 -female – 18+)

Dear Pilar,

We are applied linguistics students (opener). *We have some doubts about the project that we should conduct* (preparator).

We would like to know whether we can concentrate our project in just one place (conventionally indirect - wish) e.g. Benicàssim, Oropesa, Burriana.

As shown in example 9 above, the email sent in English includes a more formal opening (e.g. *Dear Pilar*), and the use of a conventionally indirect form (e.g. *We would like to know whether we can concentrate our project in just one place*) mitigated by an opener (e.g. *We are applied linguistics students*) and a preparator (e.g. *we have some doubts about the project*). Interestingly, openers are only used in English (see figure 10 below) but they are always accompanied by a second modifier. Openers include the sender's

introduction or identification within their BA or MA group (i.e. <S83-male – 30+> *I am taking your course on multilingual education*). A second mitigator that downgrades even more the impositive nature of the request is also used. Hence, we may state that unlike previous studies in similar sociolinguistic settings (Alcón, 2013; Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch, 2013) that showed a preference for direct and unmodified request strategies across languages irrespective of their politeness orientation, our data coincides with Codina-Espurz's (2021) findings because conventionally indirect forms were chosen in English requests. The use of mitigators, even for these indirect forms, illustrates the appropriateness of the request content. Codina-Espurz (2021) attributes this finding to the research method, since email messages were elicited as part of a pedagogical task in her study. However, this is not our case as the present email data were obtained naturally. We have examined real messages and our trilingual participants used appropriate request forms in their English email requests.

We may also state that the email requests examined in other languages (i.e. Spanish and Catalan) coincide with former research (Salazar-Campillo, 2018). The Spanish and Catalan messages in examples 7 and 8 above, show senders' tendency to employ direct forms, more specifically, blunt questions which are often mitigated. Yet, we also see in example 8 the use of intensifiers. Interestingly, these modification items are only employed in our Spanish data and they often show students' urgency in obtaining a reply or a solution. In Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2018) words, they show what students perceive as their rights as well as the immediacy of the virtual environment they are so used to. A further analysis of the use of accompanying modification devices in each language may be found in figure 10 below.

INSERT FIGURE 10

As illustrated above, there are differences regarding the use of modifiers in Spanish, Catalan and English and these differences are statistically significant according to the Friedman Test results ($\chi^2(8) = 25.15; p = 0.001$). Learners' emails include more softeners in Catalan (e.g. <S3, female, 19+> *seria possible parlar amb tú? ... podria anar un momentet?*); as previously mentioned, openers are only present in English emails (e.g. <S91, male, 32+> *I am one of your students, would you mind sending me the handout of last session?*) and they are always accompanied by other modifiers, while there is a wider use of particle *please* in Spanish (e.g. <S35, male, +32> *Me gustaria hablar con usted lo antes possible por favor*). An item that is never used in Catalan. Therefore, we may state that there seems to be a pattern which is in line with the politeness orientation of each language involved. On the one hand, social acceptance is more important than having one's own territory unimpeded in both Catalan and Spanish. Due to this fact, the use of direct forms with one mitigation item may be seen as appropriate to the context of the email (Escribano-Otero, 1998). On the other hand, negative politeness implies the use of more indirect forms. Hence, students' use of conventionally indirect requests together with modification items in English serves as an example of netiquette (Chen, 2015).

Besides, we may also interpret this finding as illustrative of the fact that languages are not stored in different compartments or the fact that multilinguals distinguish the

pragmatic conventions underlying their linguistic repertoire. Our results bear certain similarities with those deriving from Schauer's study (2021). According to this author, her students were pragmatically appropriate in the two languages involved, and her analysis focuses on naturalistic email data in several languages. Yet she mentions some possible transfer effects in the use of certain opening forms. In the present study, we do not see transfer from one language to the other. Interestingly, many cases of transfer also occur when learners are asked to write emails in two or more languages as part of a pedagogical task. In fact, as argued by several scholars (Codina-Espurz, 2021) elicited pragmatic behavior differs from natural language use and this difference may affect research findings. Therefore, further research is needed that sheds more light on the extent to which the research method influences the results obtained in multilingual email pragmatics.

Furthermore, as reported in this section, our findings both coincide and contradict previous studies conducted in very similar sociolinguistic settings (Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo, 2019; Salazar-Campillo, 2018). We wonder whether such diversity could be attributed to the proficiency level of participants involved or the research methodology followed in each study. Interestingly, these facts seem to call for further study.

Conclusion

This study aimed at examining naturalistic email data from a multilingual perspective. In doing so, email requests in Catalan, Spanish and English have been analysed and attention has been paid to the request realization strategies used, accompanying modification items and opening forms. In addition to that, individual variables like gender and age have been considered.

Regarding the status-congruence of the email requests examined, we may state that our findings confirm previous research (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011, 2018). The global analysis of the email requests examined shows that senders resorted more often to informal opening forms, they employed direct requests strategies more frequently and these ones were modified externally. On that account, the answer to our first research question has revealed that students' email requests to faculty are not always status-congruent. In interpreting these findings, we considered all email requests produced irrespective of the language employed.

Interestingly, a more detailed examination of our data has enabled us to discuss the importance of tackling the pragmatic norms underlying the participants' languages (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2021; Schauer, 2021). The multilingual approach adopted in order to find an answer to our third research question shows some differences from previous studies that call for further research. In fact, Email requests in English, Catalan and Spanish present different requestive patterns that are in line with the politeness orientation of each language. Therefore, the apparent status-incongruence shown in the global analysis of our data (see section first research question) may be interpreted as appropriate email requestive behavior when we consider the pragmatics of each language involved. In other words, more formal opening forms, conventionally indirect requests

and more modification items have been used in English while more direct forms and other specific mitigation devices have been employed in Catalan and Spanish. Yet, when put together, email requests show a higher rate of direct request forms. For this reason, it is important that we tackle multilingual pragmatic behavior from various angles. Research should include the sociocultural norms of all languages that constitute the multilingual repertoire of the participants.

While it is convenient to deal with generalized trends and account for global frequencies that help us explain learners' pragmatic performance and compare results across time and learning environments, more attention should be paid to the actual learners and this involves their multilingual background, gender or age, among other defining features. Research on individual variables in second/third language pragmatics is not new (Taguchi, 2012) but as some authors (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2022) argue it is still underexplored.

Following Gonzalez-Lloret's (2022) suggestion, we have considered the gender and age of our multilingual participants as individual variables. Unlike previous studies (Tajeddin and Malmir, 2014; Esfahlan and Boroumand, 2020), our results point out interesting differences regarding email requestive patterns. More specifically, female students showed a preference for mitigated direct forms and male senders opted for conventionally indirect requests with intensifiers. Age has also influenced the forms used. Results point out young students' preference for informal language, the use of intensifiers and less mitigation devices than older learners in line with previous research (Barón and Ortega, 2018; Marriott, 1995; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018). Therefore, we believe that the present findings may contribute to scarcity of studies on the effect of age and gender as individual variables. Interestingly, we have also observed that examining emails in each language has provided us with more data on age effects. As has mentioned above, the adoption of a multilingual viewpoint allows for a more comprehensive picture of email requesting in a multilingual setting like our own.

This study is subject to a number of limitations as the closing frame has not been examined, data could have included a higher number of messages and addressees. However, we believe that results are significant as they contribute to existing research on email pragmatics by tackling underexplored areas. According to Economidou-Kogetsidis, Halenko, Savic and (2021:10), email pragmatics is still relatively new, and there are numerous unanswered questions regarding L2 learners' choice of pragmatic options. We have tried to provide an answer to part of these questions by considering the age and gender of participants and adopting a multilingual perspective. Yet, further research is needed that helps clarify the existing contradictory findings on Spanish learners' netiquette and thus contributes to the study of multilingual cyberpragmatics.

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