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"C u @ d Uni": Analysis of academic emails written by native and non-native English speakers

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Abstract

The present study examined email communication practices of two groups of students in Iran and the United States to uncover the probable differences between Iranian and American email communication norms. The study also aimed at investigating how power distance in academic centers influences students' choices of communication strategies in email writing. The use of two politeness strategies namely "indirectness" and "message length" and some common politeness conventions including opening and closing protocols were observed in Iranian and American emails. The findings showed that both Iranian and American students' choices of opening and closing protocols alter as the students' institutional distance from the person to whom they write changes. Also, differences were found in the use of politeness strategies in American and Iranian email messages. The study concluded that Iranian students probably resort to their L1 social and cultural norms in their email communication, particularly, in their status-equal communication.

Keywords: computer mediated communication, communication strategies, email writing, institutional distance

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1. Introduction

Over the last 15 years, the use of email as an asynchronous communication mechanism has dramatically increased in all domains of social interactions: business, between friends, academic centers, etc. (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). In academic settings, email is increasingly becoming a major communication channel through which students make personal and social relationships, submit their homework, make appointments, and so on (Samar, Navidinia & Mehrani, 2010). It has rapidly become popular because it better suits people's needs for a fast and cheap means of communication than do fax, telephone or pen and paper letters (Meij, de Vries, Boersma, Pieters, & Wegerif, 2005). This rapidity in growth has made email communication a ubiquitous instrument for communication. Ubiquity, however, does not guarantee effective use. Actually, current research reports that many people still have difficulty in selecting appropriate discourse strategies for email writing. According to a comprehensive survey by Information Mapping Inc. in 2003, 34% of the participants in the US mentioned that they wasted between 30 to 60 minutes every day reading badly written emails (Stibbe, 2004).

As is the way with any technology, email communication has many advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages are transmitting the messages rapidly, availability at any time, and spreading the news quickly. On the other hand, the problems that people may face in online communication are uncertainty of successful electronic communication, lags in response time, absence of interactional coherence, and lack of paralinguistic clues (Liaw, 1998). Without paralinguistic features like vocal inflections, gestures, facial expressions, shared physical and mental context, emails are very complex since email writers have to rely on every written word for effective communication (Chen, 2006).

The fact that developing socio-pragmatic competence is one of the essential components of language proficiency is well-documented. However, due to the recent development of modern technology and the prevailing use of electronic communication, it seems vital that English

learners develop what is referred to as *electronic literacy* (Shtzer & Warschaver 2000). The ability to use appropriate communication strategies, perform speech acts, observe the level of formality through computer mediated communication (CMC) are essential components of electronic literacy. Chen (2006) used the term "email literacy" (p. 36) to refer to a pragmatic competence and critical language awareness in email communication. Chen asserts that "email literacy is a pressing issue in the digital era and needs to receive greater attention in second language research and education" (p. 36). Likewise, Bloch (2002) discusses "using email as a form of communication, therefore, necessitates a different understanding of how language affects the relationship between formal and informal writing of what is private and what is public" (p. 121).

Some researchers argue that the absence of social cues in email communication can lead to *flaming behavior* (Friedman & Currall, 2003; Harrison & Falvey, 2002). Flaming behavior is "manipulative and disrespectful behavior that escalates anger and reduces productivity" (Turange, 2008, p. 43). Sporoul and Kiesler (1991) argue that flaming behaviour in email communication may result from a miscalculation of the relationship between the writer and the reader of an email message. Therefore, the high potential of email to be instrumental in amplifying the interactions among people requires gaining a deeper understanding of the virtual world of email which includes a variety of subcultures with different values and standards, and corresponding speech genres and language (Bloch, 2002).

2. Review of Literature

2.1 The nature of email communication

Email is an effective medium for exchanges between distant groups of people. It has started to become the most common form of computer mediated communication (CMC) in academic contexts for both personal communication and pedagogical purposes (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). However, as it is becoming a more commonly used means of communication in academic contexts, complaints of faculty disturbed "by

the frequency of their students' email messages as well as the content and linguistic form of these messages abound" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p. 59). This might be due to some email-specific challenges that email users encounter in their communications. Firstly, due to lack of paralinguistic cues such as gestures, facial expressions, shared mental and physical context which carry a great deal of communication load and serve as "social lubricants" (Chen, 2006, p. 35) in face to face communications, email users have to rely on each and every single word for appropriate communication. This is particularly so in status-unequal communications since the absence of social context in CMC and more specifically in email communication may keep students unaware of whom they are writing to and may result in a communication that lacks status congruence features (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007).

Second, as Chen (2006) discusses, there is no fixed and standard email writing rules for email users to observe; therefore, they may feel delighted as they are liberated from the restrictive rules of traditional letter writing; yet, they have to struggle how to write emails that meet the recipient's standards. Another important reason stems from the nature of email texts. Studies on email discourse have evidenced that email discourse tends to be less formal compared to pen and paper letters (Baron, 1998; Bloch, 2002; Chen 2006; Shortis, 2001). Baron (1998) asserts that "[E]mail tends to use more casual lexicon, to be less carefully edited, and to assume a greater degree of familiarity with interlocutor" (p. 147). Among other characteristics of email which highlight the informality of this discourse are the frequent use of first names, even in the communication of people who never have met each other, and the use of spoken conventions mixed with that of written conventions. All of these linguistic usages and stylistic registers impose a large amount of spoken quality into email discourse. It stands to reason that these circumstances make email communication a difficult discourse to handle, especially for non-native students of English whose use of language seems to be more formal and bookish while they have to simultaneously draw on two linguistic sources-spoken and written.

2.2 Previous Studies

There has been a number of research investigating email discourse (e.g. Bloch, 2002; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005, 2007; Bjørge, 2007; Chen, 2006; Duthler, 2006; Li, 2000; Liaw 1998; Liu & Salder, 2003; Wall, 2007). Perhaps, one of the earliest studies investigating the use of email as a medium of communication is the one by conducted by Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig conducted in 1996 (Chen, 2006). Assessing the effects of email requests sent by Native Speakers (NSs) and non-native Speakers (NNSs) to two faculty recipients in a comparative study, Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) found that NNSs' requests differed from those of NSs in the use of mitigations (i.e. politeness features) as well as extra-linguistic aspects, such as the emphasis on personal needs and unreasonable time frames rather than institutional demands. In a similar study, Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined email requests sent by native and non-native English speaking students to faculty members at an American university over a period of several semesters. Biesenbach-Lucas applied Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper's (1989) speech act analysis framework to analyze email requests from pragmatic and lexico-syntactic perspectives. The results showed that more requests are realized through direct strategies as well as hints than through conventionally indirect strategies which are typically found in comparative speech act studies. The author commented that "politeness conventions in email appear to be a work in progress, and native speakers demonstrate greater resources in creating polite messages to their professors than non-native speakers" (p.59). Other studies have reported that second language (L2) students usually employ fewer modals in their emails than do American students. L2 students do not frequently use negotiation or supportive moves such as reasons and apologies in their emails (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth 2001). Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) found that while American students use email communication for facilitative, substantive, and relational purposes, NNS's do not display a tendency to use email for interpersonal and relational purposes. These comparative studies indicate

that second language learners need to develop effective negotiation skills for successful email communication.

However, non-comparative studies have not yielded similar results. For instance, Bloch (2002) examined how students in a graduate course in ESL used email on their own initiative to interact with their instructor. He categorized the emails into four categories, namely: (1) phatic communion, (2) asking for help, (3) making excuses, and (4) making formal requests. Bloch analyzed the types of rhetorical strategies that the writers of emails used to achieve their purposes for sending email messages in relation to the category of emails. Claiming the importance of email for students as a means of interacting with their instructor, Bloch advocated that the students employ a wide range of rhetorical strategies and exhibit a good ability to switch between formal and informal language depending upon the rhetorical context of the message. In a longitudinal study, Chen (2006) reported the development of an ESL student's email communication. Drawing on a critical discourse analysis approach, Chen investigated the participant's struggles for politeness and appropriateness in communicating with her classmates and professors. The findings showed that email literacy of the participants developed as she gained a deeper understanding of the cultural relations, increasing the knowledge of student/professor interaction and the realization of culture-specific politeness in the target language.

Taking the issue of power distance into account in a recent study, Bjørge (2007) investigated the level of formality in 110 international students' emails sent to academic staff in an international university in Norway. Relying on Hofstede's cultural dimension of power distance (PD) to distinguish between the students with high and low PD cultural backgrounds (Hofstede, 2001), Bjørge observed the choice of initial greeting and complimentary close by students from different cultural backgrounds. The findings of her study indicated that students from relatively high PD cultures are more likely to opt for formal alternatives, concluding that national culture is an aspect to be taken into account when analyzing emails.

The importance of email is well established; yet, research on this new discourse is quite premature as email is still in its infancy as a tool for communication. In spite of a growing number of research on the linguistic properties of email, it is not explicitly reported how people with different cultural backgrounds use English to communicate via email. Indeed, most of the previously reported research has been conducted in the Western countries, and there seems to be a paucity of research in Eastern countries. Besides, the concept of institutional distance as a culturally shaped construct is noticed as an influential factor in determining the quality of language behaviour but has not been well investigated in email communication. Moreover, it stands without saying that in today's communication, the momentous development of email communication and its prevailing ubiquity deserves more attention than ever before.

Following the pervious studies on the pervasive use of emails in everyday communication, this study attempts to uncover probable similarities or differences between Iranian and American graduate students in using email for communicating with their professors and classmates. It is hoped that examining the contents of emails that these two groups of email users compose can provide a comparative account of the features of email communication in two different contexts.

3. Method

This comparative study investigates the use of English in email communication by two groups of students through the analysis of the actual email messages they composed. The reason for conducting this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of the use of English in CMC by comparing the actual emails that some American and Iranian graduate students composed. As its primary purposes, this study focuses on the following questions:

- How different is Iranian students' use of English language from Native Americans' in email communication?

- How do Iranian students manage their choice of communication strategies as their institutional distance from the one to whom they communicate changes?

To address the above questions, the present study first describes some of the features of the actual emails that the participants composed. The study, then, investigates how socio-cultural and institutional distance influences the way Iranian English students and Native Americans communicate through email.

3.1 Participants

Two groups of graduate students participated in this study. The first group consisted of 17 students from an Iranian graduate university, and the second group was made up of 14 students from an American university. The Iranian participants were MA students at a state university in Tehran majoring in TEFL and American participants were native speakers of English who were studying Education at the time of data collection. The Iranian participants were advanced second language users of English and had studied English for four years during their BA. To enter their MA program, they had participated in a highly competitive language proficiency entrance exam. The participants were among the 40 top candidates who were admitted. This indicates that they already had a good command of English. In addition, the participants studied English for about two years during their MA program too. Of 17 students, 9 were females and 8 were males. Their ages ranged from 24 to 28. All of the Iranian participants affirmed that they had not been taught how to write emails in English, though they had passed a letter writing course in their BA in which they were supposed to learn how to write pen and paper letters.

Of 14 American participants, 9 were female and 5 were male students. They were studying Education at MA level. Like their Iranian counterparts, they affirmed that they had never been formally taught how to write emails. They were between 22 to 29 years old. The fact that the participants had not been taught how to write emails in English implied

that they had shaped their 'email literacy' incidentally through electronic communication with other people.

3.2 Materials and procedure

The data for this study include two email corpora which have been gathered from both American and Iranian participants. They are actual messages that the participants had sent to either their professors or classmates. It should be mentioned that the participants were asked to forward their 'already sent emails' so that the researchers could prevent the subjects from being affected by the knowledge that their emails would be investigated. The participants were asked to take part in the study by forwarding us the emails they had sent either to their professors or their classmates. The researchers could single out 225 email samples belonging to Iranians and 160 emails written by Americans. Of 225 Iranian emails, 120 emails had been sent to instructors and 105 to classmates. Of 160 American emails, 64 emails had been sent to instructors and 96 to classmates. There were 26 additional emails that the participants forwarded us. However, they either were composed in Persian or were sent to pen pals. Therefore, the researchers removed all these incompatible emails and focused only on English emails sent to professors and peers.

The features investigated in the analysis included: opening and closing protocols, the purposes for which the messages were written, and two politeness strategies including indirectness, and message length. Also, emails in this study were checked for grammatical, punctuation, and spelling mistakes. Finally, cases of language shift, and code-switching were recorded in Iranians' emails.

4. Results

4.1 Social protocols

Opening and closing protocols in status-equal messages (student to student emails)

Social protocols, including salutations and complimentary endings, are generally considered as essential mechanisms of expressing respect in pen and paper letters. Although the use of these protocols in electronic letters is quite common, they are not thought as integral parts of email writing, particularly in informal emails. This might be due to the fact that this type of information is already given in the “virtual envelope” of the email messages (Danet, 2001). From the total of 120 Iranian messages sent to peers 92 emails contained salutations such as “Dear (name)” or common greetings like “Hello honey”. The application of salutations and opening greetings in American emails, however, appeared to be less frequent in student to student emails. Of 96 examined emails, 41 messages carried opening phrases. As far as the complimentary endings are concerned, the difference of frequency between Iranian and American messages appeared to be more evident. Out of 120 Iranian emails, 102 contained a closing protocol of some type, while from 96 American emails 35 carried closing protocols.

Opening and closing protocols in status-unequal messages (student to professor emails)

In status-unequal messages, American emails were not much different from those of Iranian as far as the use of openings and closings is concerned. In the case of openings, out of 64 American emails sent to professors, 52 contained salutations of some type. Likewise, 98 out of 105 Iranian emails carried opening phrases. The use of closings was also quite evident in two groups of emails. In their 64 emails to their professors, American students used 58 cases of closings. By the same token, Iranian students used 96 cases of closings in their 105 emails to their professors. Table 1 shows the percentage of the use of social protocols in each group of emails.

Table 1: Use of opening and closing protocols in emails

Types of requests	N	Use of opening	The % of the use of opening	Use of closing	The % of the use of closing
American status-equal	96	41	42.7%	35	36.5%
American status-unequal	64	52	81.3%	58	90.6%
Iranian status-equal	120	92	76.7%	102	85%
Iranian status-unequal	105	98	93.3%	96	91.4%

In comparison with American emails, the use of social protocols in Iranian emails in both types of emails (status-equal and status-unequal) was much more dominant. Iranian students used 76.7% opening and 85.0% closing protocols of various types in their emails to peers, while Americans exhibited a weaker tendency in the application of these conventions in their student to student emails. Indeed, only 42.7% of their emails contained openings and 36.5% of them contained complimentary closes. Similarly, in 93.3% of their electronic mails to their professors, Iranian students used opening conventions and 91.4% of their emails contained complimentary endings. This was not much different from American emails which contained 81.3% opening and 90.6% closing statements.

To examine whether Iranian participants are significantly different from their American counterparts in the application of opening and closing protocols in emails, using a Chi-square test, the frequency of such protocols in emails was compared. As Table 2 shows, the Pearson Chi-square test indicated that except for the use of closings in Iranian versus American unequal emails, the differences were statistically significant. The results, as presented in Table 2, showed significant differences between Iranian and American students' use of opening and closing phrases. Also, the difference between opening phrases between Iranian equal and Iranian unequal emails was statistically significant.

Table 2: Chi-square test for the use of openings and closings in different groups of emails

Pearson Chi-Square test	Value	DF	<i>P</i>
Openings in Iranian vs. American unequal	5.818	1	.016
Openings in Iranian vs. American equal	25.994	1	.000
Openings in Iranian equal vs. Iranian unequal	11.842	1	.001
Closings in Iranian vs. American unequal	.032	1	.859
Closings in Iranian vs. American equal	54.174	1	.000
Closings in Iranian equal vs. Iranian unequal	2.192	1	.139

A further difference between Iranian and American emails was that while Iranian students used a rather limited range of openings and closings, Americans exhibited a relatively wider range of social protocols. Table 3 shows the common opening protocols that both Iranian and American students used in their messages.

Table 3: Examples of openings and closings in Iranian and American emails

		Iranian protocols	American protocols
Status-equal	Openings	Dear (name, classmate, friend); Hello (name), hello, hi; Salam, salam khubi? How are you?, Is everything ok?	Dear (name), my dear (name); First name; Hello(name), hi, hey; Hi sweetie, hi honey; My honey, my dear (name); Greetings from (a place); Hope you are well, fine etc.
	Closings	Best regards, kind regards, regards; Sincerely yours, sincerely; Best, all the best; Best wishes, wish you the best.	Love, lots of love, love you, with love; Cheers; Take care; All the best; See you soon, see you later, see you tomorrow; Keep in touch; Good luck.
Status-unequal	Openings	Dear (Dr. last name), (professor), (instructor); Hello, hello how are you?; Hi, hi (Dr. last name); Dr. (last name) I hope everything goes well with you.	Dear (Dr. last name), (professor), (instructor); My dear (first name); Hello, Hi my (first name); Hi my (first name); Dearest (first name), etc.

Closings	(Best), (kind) regards, regards; Sincerely yours, sincerely, yours sincerely; Best, all the best; Best wishes	(Best), (kind) regards, regards; Cheers; Sincerely yours, sincerely; Love, lots of love, love you, with love; All the best, best
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4.2 Purposes of the messages

In the later stage, the emails were classified based on the purposes for which they were written. This was done as a preceding stage for further analysis of the use of politeness strategies in emails. In so doing, students' email messages were examined for the communication purposes which were assigned to email messages based on the communicative goals. Email messages were coded by the researchers based on the primary goal for which they were sent. Overall, the emails fitted into five main categories, namely: (1) **social and relational messages**, (2) **requesting**, (3) **informing**, (4) **sending an attachment**, (5) and **making excuses**. Nevertheless, there were some unique emails which could not be classified, since the purposes for which they were written were not among the above categories. Yet, the number of such emails was not enough to have the researchers to add other categories to the above categorization. Therefore, the researchers specified a new category under the name of '**other messages**' to be able to categorize all of the messages. Table 4 shows the number of each class of emails.

Table 4: Number and percentage of each class of emails

Types of emails	Iranian Equal		Iranian Unequal		American Equal		American Unequal		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Social/relational	29	24.17	6	5.71	21	21.87	8	12.5	64	16.06
Requesting	12	10	45	42.86	16	16.67	23	35.94	96	26.37
Informing	28	23.33	4	3.81	29	30.21	8	12.5	69	17.46
Sending files	34	28.33	30	28.57	18	18.75	16	25	98	25.16
Making excuse	3	2.5	8	7.61	4	4.17	6	9.37	21	5.91
Others	14	11.67	12	11.42	8	8.33	3	4.69	37	9.04
Total	120	100	105	100	96	100	64	100	385	100

The classification of emails based on the primary purpose for which they were written showed that more than 26% of both Iranian and American emails were requesting messages. Then, politeness strategies used only in requesting emails were analyzed. This decision was made because requesting messages are among those speech acts which, if to be appealing, need a good command of language use. This demands a good application of politeness strategies on the part of email writers. On the other hand, messages other than requests, more often than not, do not carry face-threatening acts, and can easily be sent with no elaborate use of conversational strategies. This is particularly so in *sending file* and *informing* messages.

4.3 Politeness strategies in emails

To examine the influence of the differences in socio-cultural norms in request making between Iranian and American cultures, the researchers compared the two politeness strategies used in emails, namely (in)directness, and message length. It is generally assumed that requests which are made indirectly are more polite than those which are made directly (Coulmas, 2005; Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Therefore, the emails in which the requests are indirectly stated in interrogative form are assumed as more polite requests, and those directly made in declarative or imperative forms are considered as less polite requests. Also, the longer the request, the more polite it sounds (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Coulmas, 2005). Therefore, we assumed that long messages are more polite than shorter messages.

Regarding the indirectness strategy, while American students stated their status-unequal requests both directly and indirectly, almost all of the Iranians' requests were indirectly stated. Iranians showed a tendency for making requests in an interrogative way. In status-equal requests, however, Iranians, like Americans, exhibited the use of both direct and indirect strategies for stating their requests. Table 5 shows the percentage of the application of the strategy of indirectness in the four classes of requests.

Table 5: Use of the strategy of indirectness in requesting emails

Types of requests	Number of emails	Number of emails with strategy	The % of the use of indirectness strategy in emails
American status-equal	16	7	43%
American status-unequal	23	17	76%
Iranian status-equal	12	7	58%
Iranian status-unequal	45	42	93%

In order to compare the frequency of the application of indirectness strategy in different categories of emails, the application of this strategy was first compared in Iranian status-equal with Iranian status-unequal emails by running a Chi-square test. The result of the test, as shown in Table 6, revealed that status-equal emails were significantly different from status-unequal emails. That is, the frequency of Iranians' use of indirectness strategy changes as the institutional distance between the interlocutors alters. Also, to compare Iranians' application of this strategy in email communication with Americans', the same procedure was followed. The comparison of the use of this strategy in Iranian and American emails, both status-equal and -unequal, showed that Iranians' use of indirectness strategy is significantly different from Americans'.

Table 6: Chi-square test for the use of indirectness strategy in different groups of requesting emails

Pearson Chi-Square test	Value	DF	<i>P</i>
Indirectness in Iranian vs. American unequal	9.877	1	.002
Indirectness in Iranian vs. American equal	4.669	1	.031
Indirectness in Iranian equal vs. Iranian unequal	37.582	1	.000

As for the second strategy, length of message, the average number of words used in each group of emails was counted. The relative length of each group of messages is shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Average length of each request measured through counting the words used in each email.

Types of requests	N	Mean length	SD	Std. Error Mean
American status-equal	16	37.06	19.68	4.92
American status-unequal	23	91.78	44.92	9.36
Iranian status-equal	12	34.75	26.04	7.51
Iranian status-unequal	45	82.35	41.99	6.26

To statistically compare the length of requests in each category of emails, three t-tests were used. The results, as shown in Table 8, revealed that Iranians' use of long message strategy is not significantly different from Americans' neither in status-equal nor in -unequal communication. However, further comparison indicated that Iranians' message length changes as the institutional distance alters.

Table 8: T-test for the use of long message strategy in different groups of requesting emails

T-test	DF	P
Long message in Iranian vs. American unequal	66	0.39
Long message in Iranian vs. American equal	26	0.79
Long message in Iranian equal vs. Iranian unequal	55	0.00

4.4 Cases of code switching in Iranian emails

Iranian emails were also examined for the cases of code switching. Iranians showed a tendency for code switching whilst writing to their classmates. The cases of code switching seemed to be more common in greetings, addressing terms, and closing protocols. Yet, in the content of emails, some cases of code switching were observed. An example is provided below.

Salam xxx jan. [*Hello dear xxx*]

New year and the birthday of prophet Mohammad (PBUH)
mobaarak. [*Happy New Year and the birthday of Mohammad*]

Please find attached revised part one. Changed sections are marked in word and you can see if the "track changes" from tools menu is

turned on (or by ctrl + shift +E). I made some comments that in some cases changes and revision must be made. I will send you part two in the same way by afternoon. BTW thank you for your CD. God gives you kheir
*[May God bless you]*all the best
xxx

Additionally, some expressions which were originally Persian were found in an awkwardly translated manner in Iranian status-equal emails. An example is the above email in which the last sentence was originally a Persian expression. Such expressions were not normally found in status-unequal communications however.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As was shown, most of the emails sent to professors by both Iranian and American participants enjoyed opening and closing protocols. In fact, the study showed that 93% of all Iranian messages had opening salutations, and 91% had closing conventions. This trend, though in a weaker version, especially as far as closings are concerned, is also evident in American emails. Actually, 81% of Americans' emails contained openings and 90% contained closing protocols of some kind. This can be interpreted as the perceived importance of social conventions in formal communications. It seems that both Iranian and American students pay due attention to the use of these conventions in their email communications. The use of phrases like: "Dear Dr. (name)" or "Hello my professor" is not necessarily done in order to inform the recipient of the messages to whom the email is targeted (Danet, 2001; Herring, 1996). Rather, it seems that these openings are stated merely for the sake of respect and politeness, because such phrases do not carry any communicative information, rather they add to the politeness and reverence load of emails.

The application of such conventions in Iranian emails appeared to be stronger not only because of the higher frequency of the use of opening

protocols, but also by an outstanding feature in the quality of Iranian greetings. Indeed, most of opening protocols in the Iranian students' emails included combinations of several greeting conventions at the beginning of emails. The prevalence of greetings for Iranian people might be due to a cultural transfer through which Iranians resort to their own socio-cultural norms and standards while greeting in the English language. Another important point about Iranians' frequent use of greetings was the use of question-like greetings such as: "How are you?" or "Is everything OK?" This was not ordinary in American emails. In fact, American participants continued to express greetings as wishes in the form of phrases and sentences. Bearing in mind the Iranians' popular cultural norm of asking questions in face to face communications, telephone interactions, and even in written greetings as opening small talks, (Talaghani-Nickzam, 2002) the role of transfer at a macro-linguistic level is highlighted.

The study also showed that in emails to their classmates, Iranians continued to be submissive in writing opening and closing protocols alike. The comparison of the data showed that Iranians employed openings and closings respectively in 76% and 85% of emails sent to classmates, while Americans exhibited a strong reluctance in the use of openings and closings in writing to their peers. The application of opening and closing conventions in American emails was 42% and 36%, respectively. This can be interpreted as either Americans were very much influenced by institutional distance, while Iranians were not. Alternatively, while Americans and Iranians alike were influenced by institutional distance, Americans were not influenced by a further variable such as their socio-cultural norms, but Iranians were. However, it seems it is only the second hypothesis that the results of this study confirmed. Research on cultural and social norms has shown that in the Middle Eastern societies, like Iran, social conventions are considered to be very important (Coulmas, 2005; Wardhough, 1986). Also, for Iranians the importance of greetings and closings are quite apparent. Talaghani-Nickzam (2002) claims that Iranians tend to have longer opening talks

and greetings compared to English speakers. Iranian students' persistence in using opening and closing protocols in their status-unequal email communication was not due to the fact that institutional distance did not have any effect on their email writing but because they were influenced by a further variable through which they transferred their own cultural norms from their first language. This was further proved in other features of email contents that this study examined. Therefore, it is seemingly a confirmation of the previous hypothesis that Iranian cultural norms might mediate Iranians' greetings in their email writing.

The analysis of politeness strategies demonstrated that while the strategy of indirectness can be seen in American students' emails from time to time, Iranians are very willing to state their status-unequal requests more indirectly. As was stated, the analysis of status-unequal requests showed that almost all of the Iranians students' requests (93%) were indirectly stated. In student to student e-communications, however, like Americans, Iranian students showed more varieties in their request makings. In other words, their requests were made both directly and indirectly. This shows that generally, Americans, and Iranians alike, use both ways of making requests; however, Iranians appeared to be more affected by the institutional distance they had from the person they write to. Americans' style of request making, on the other hand, was proved not to be fluctuated much as the institutional distance between Americans and their email receivers alters. This might be rooted in social and cultural differences between the two cultures in question.

The second politeness strategy, message length, is differently employed by Iranian and American students. The requests that Iranians sent to their professors were about twice as much longer as the requests they sent to their classmates. This indicates that Iranians used this politeness strategy to a great extent. Similarly, American status-unequal requests were longer than their status-equal requests. It can be concluded that, Iranians' and Americans' requests were more or less similarly affected by the institutional distance from the people they make their requests to.

According to Rudy and Grusec (2006), the roles of students and teachers in traditional cultures, like Iran, are strictly defined, and are not allowed to be situationally-negotiated; thus, students who are in an inferior, lower-status position are prescribed to demonstrate a high amount of admiration to their teachers/professors, who are in a superior, authoritative position. It is plausible to suppose that for Iranian students, Persian culturally-shaped language behaviour in student to student communication had a serious influence. Cases of code switching, the use of Persian opening and closing social protocols, and even word-by-word translation of some Persian collocations into English (which seems to be done quite consciously and intentionally) is only interpretable as the influence of socio-cultural and pragmatic norms of their first language, Persian. On the other hand, this influence seems to be much weaker in their communications with their professors. It seems that Iranians tended to sound more like English speakers in their emails to their professors by showing no case of language switch, using only English language social protocols and collocations. The implicit point in the above differences is that while Iranians are influenced by their socio-cultural norms of their L1, in student-to-student communications, they are not much affected in their communications with people who are institutionally in higher position. This shows that L1 socio-cultural and pragmatic norms which, like 'Ionian Soldiers', function as "silent disarmers" (Salmani-Nodushan, forthcoming) tend to become deactivated in the presence of institutional distance. To put it in metaphoric language, it seems that Ionian Soldiers, (L1 Socio-cultural norms and standards) prefer to remain within the Horse and keep themselves hidden from the eyes' of the "Trojan Castle Guards" when they feel the guards are awake (the presence of the institutionally higher people). More elaborately, Iranians' email behaviour is influenced by both their socio-cultural norms as well as the institutional distance. However, institutional distance appeared to be more crucial in determining Iranians' language behaviour. In other words, institutional distance seems to override the transfer of socio-cultural norms in Iranians' use of email.

The fact that the cases of code switching and Persian collocations in Iranians' emails reduced in number following the shift in the receiver of the messages further highlights the role of institutional distance as an influential factor in email writing. Additionally, it indicates that such mistakes can more readily be overcome than macro-linguistic differences between the two languages. This might imply that macro-linguistic differences might be more enduring and less malleable than micro-linguistic variations. In fact, it seems that though language learners can improve their language mastery at micro-linguistic level during quite a while, it is exceedingly more difficult to "be freed from constraints of [our] psyche and society" (Gould, 2000, p.276) during the same period of time.

It should be mentioned that this comparative study was limited in that the data included one-sided emails not two-sided email dialogues. Also, since email can commonly be used for private purposes, many individuals prefer not to have their emails investigated by researchers. We could not find more students interested in participating in this research. This study should, therefore, be considered as descriptive and the conclusions and findings as suggestive. Further research in different socio-linguistic and cultural contexts can be conducted to determine the extent to which these findings hold true.

This admittedly limited study illustrated some of the complexities of email communication in relation to socio-cultural norms and standards, and the issue of institutional distance. The study also revealed that email communication in American academic context is more associated with informality. American students tend to make their requests in a relatively straightforward manner. Also, they employ a wider range of social protocols for opening and closing emails. We hope that these findings can best be applied for letter writing courses where Iranian L2 learners develop their email literacy.

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