Address Forms and Politeness Markers in Spanish Students' Emails to Faculty

Fórmulas de tratamiento y marcadores de cortesía en correos electrónicos de estudiantes españoles al profesorado

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In the present era of global online communication, email exchanges are one the most common means of interaction between students and professors (Tseng, 2015). However, emails may convey an impolite tone if students do not take status or power imbalance into account to show politeness (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). The present study explored the informal second person pronoun of address (*tú*) and the formal one (*usted*) in first and follow-up requestive emails sent by Spanish students. In addition, some structural elements to show politeness in the emails were also examined. Although students had time to edit and correct their emails, our results indicate that in half of first-contact emails *tú* is employed, a percentage that increases in the follow-up email, therefore ignoring the degree of politeness expected in student-professor email communication. On the other hand, verbal and structural markers of politeness were broadly employed to indicate deference, especially in the first email.

Keywords: *politeness; emails; tú, usted*

En la era actual de comunicación global online, los correos electrónicos son una de las formas más comunes en la interacción entre estudiantes y profesorado (Tseng, 2015). Sin embargo, los correos pueden contener un tono descortés si los estudiantes no tienen en consideración variables como estatus o poder para mostrar cortesía (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). En este estudio se analizó el pronombre de segunda persona informal (tú) y el formal (usted) en correos de primer contacto y en sucesivos enviados por estudiantes españoles. También se examinaron los elementos estructurales que marcan cortesía. A pesar de que los estudiantes tuvieron tiempo para editar y corregir sus correos, nuestros resultados muestran que en la mitad de los primeros correos se usa tú, porcentaje que se incrementó en los correos posteriores, ignorando de esta manera el grado de cortesía esperado en la comunicación estudiante-profesorado. Por otra parte, los marcadores verbales y estructurales de cortesía se usaron ampliamente para indicar deferencia, especialmente en el primer correo.

Palabras clave: *cortesía; correos electrónicos; tú; usted*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s, Brown and Gilman investigated address forms in some European languages and provided a distinction between the informal pronoun (T, henceforth) and the formal counterpart (V, henceforth). These two pronouns are chosen depending on power and solidarity relationships between the parties in a conversation. However, the dichotomy T/V is not universal, as some languages (e.g., English) lack these forms to show respect whereas others (e.g., Spanish) do display this distinction. Choice of T vs V to show deference derives from Brown and Levinson's (1987: 61) concept of *face*, which is defined as "the public self-image that every member wants for himself". In this vein, these authors suggest that some communicative acts can be threatening to the addressee's face, and thus some face-work needs to be carried out to act appropriately in a given interaction.

Power relationships are established between the parties in face-to-face communication: the less powerful interactant should show politeness to the more powerful one by means of, for example, forms of address such as title + surname (*Doctor Brown*) or honorifics (*Sir*, *Madam*). In online contexts, the use of politeness is also mandatory in asymmetrical power relationships, and emails need to be carefully written to a superior to ensure they are polite. This is especially relevant for students who write emails to their professors, as pragmatic infelicities may occur if students do not take into account factors such as power and status.

In this regard, students at university level are heavy technology users, and, as a result, email users. This generation is commonly known as the 'Millennial Generation' (Strauss & Howe, 2000) and these students are commonly referred to as digital natives (Prensky, 2001), that is, highly familiar with media and digital technology. However, due to poor or non-existent knowledge of politeness in email communication, emails to faculty may be perceived as too direct, status-incompatible and, thus, impolite. Previous research (e.g., Bou-Franch, 2011, Formentelli & Hajek, 2016, Salazar-Campillo & Codina-Espurz, 2018) have demonstrated a preference for informality and solidarity in student-professors email communication. As Briz (2003) claims, this fact may be further stressed in cultures in which closeness is emphasised (i.e., Spain) and hierarchy boundaries seem to be lost.

In this paper, we aim at examining politeness in students' emails by looking at the use of the formal pronoun *usted* and the informal one *tú* in student-initiated emails and their follow-up email after the professor's reply. Moreover, other indicators such as verbal and structural elements of the emails will be analysed as they also contribute to a polite tone, which should be present in this type of online exchanges.

2. POLITENESS FEATURES IN EMAILS

According to previous research (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015), emails addressed to university lecturers need to follow politeness conventions as power and status are at stake in this type of academic settings. Lack of politeness features in email writing may result in negative reactions on the lecturers' part, as students seem to overlook the rules of "netiquette" (Zapata, 2002). Most students send requestive emails to their professors about different academic issues, with varying degrees of imposition: from low imposition requests (for example, asking for information) to high impositive requests (for example, asking for a deadline extension). Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) found no correlation between email directness and degree of imposition, as her university students used bald-on-record strategies (i.e., a want statement, or please + imperative) in both high- and low- imposition requests. These results contradict Félix-Brasdefer's (2012) findings, which pointed to the fact that L2 Spanish learners appropriately varied the degree of email directness depending on how

impositive their request was. Similarly, in the Greek university context, Sifianou (2013: 90) also claimed that "it is almost unthinkable for Greek students to use informal language (…) with faculty". Research on students' perceptions on degree of imposition has argued that students seem to be aware of how impositive their request may be for the recipient, writing thus their emails accordingly (Codina-Espurz, in press).

Politeness in emails may be accomplished on the one hand, by the use of formality (for example, using formal pronouns of address or verbal markers), and on the other, by structural elements (i.e., openings and closings) which, although optional, contribute to the respectful character of the email (Usó-Juan, 2022).

2.1 *Second-person pronouns in emails*

A smooth flow of social interaction may be threatened by the misuse of the appropriate pronouns in those languages in which there is a distinction between a formal and an informal address pronoun, such as Spanish, French or German. Therefore, a wrong choice of pronoun may result in "confusion, misunderstanding, or irritation" (Belz & Kinginger, 2003: 599). Employing T or V is a challenging task for language learners, who may apply their L1 conventions to their foreign language incorrectly or ignore the social parameters involved in both oral and written communication.

In Spanish, the more familiar the participants in a conversation are, the greater preference to use *tú*. In contrast, *usted* is used when social distance increases and thus formality needs to be accounted for (Kinginger & Farrell, 2004). However, several decades ago, Brown and Gilman (1960) claimed that pronouns of address in Europe were evolving toward a more reciprocal use. In this sense, Brown and Levinson (1987: 107) argued that "the use of T (singular non-honorific pronouns) to a non-familiar alter can claim solidarity". The tendency towards this solidarity was attested, for example, by Bargiela, Boz, Gokzadze, Mills and Rukhadze (2002) in institutional settings in the UK. In the Spanish context, Blas-Arroyo's (1994-1995) findings also showed that the distinction formal vs. informal seemed to be changing in favour of a more egalitarian tone between speakers, which minimized social distance. This may be due to the fact that, as Briz (2003) claims, the Spanish culture approximates closeness and egalitarianism. González-Lloret (2008) explored the use of pronouns of address by L1 speakers of Spanish when engaged in synchronous computer-mediated communication with learners of Spanish as a second language. They employed either *tú* or *vosotros*, thus showing informality and closeness with other students they had never met before. Indeed, as argued by Níkleva (2018), in recent years students' emails opt for spontaneity and egalitarianism (therefore showing features of dialogic discourse) in detriment of politeness features, blurring any asymmetrical relationship in the choice of pronouns.

The shift towards more familiarity has also been put forward by Vivas-Márquez (2008) and Vela-Delfa (2018). The latter claimed that there seems to be a tendency to stop using *usted* in faculty interactions, especially in computed-mediated communication. In this type of interactions, Alcón-Soler (2015) reported a preference for *tú* at the expense of *usted*, which points to a lack of perception of student-professor relationship as one of social distance and power. However, variation in the use of *tú* and *usted* has to be taken into account; for example, Níkleva and Núñez (2013) showed that nearly 80% of the students employed *usted* to address their professors, a finding which may have been influenced by the age of the professor, as attested by the authors. In this line, Bella and Sifianou (2012) reported that Greek students' emails were characterised by the formal tone by means of the use of second person plural (V), which shows deference towards the more powerful party in the exchange, i.e., the professor, therefore adhering to more recent research claiming that "lecturers prefer to keep their relationship with their students formal" (Hashemian & Farhang-Ju, 2019: 142).

2.2 *Markers of politeness in emails*

According to Crystal (2001), a standard email conforms to the following structure: an opening, a body (the message itself), and a closing. The message is, obviously, the obligatory element, whereas the opening and the closing are optional and carry part of the affective content of the email (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2007). Despite their optional nature, openings in formal emails set a polite tone, indicating the relationship between the sender and the recipient. In the case of student-to-faculty emails, it has been claimed that a proper email structure, along with the use of address forms, make emails (and, especially, requestive emails) more polite and appropriate (Hashemian & Farhang-Ju, 2019). However, a lack of openings is likely to occur as part of a chain of emails which are responded quickly. Mirroring dialogic discourse, when emails are answered promptly, openings may be left out (Crystal, 2001, Taponen, 2014). As a consequence, the oft-cited hybrid nature of emails is clearly visible, combining oral and written features which may cause a sense of co-presence of participants (and thus, more closeness and intimacy) in this type of online communication.

As mentioned above, closings are also optional components of emails, which commonly include a pre-closing formula (i.e., *Regards*, *Thank you*) and the sender's identification, that is, the signature (Crystal, 2001; Salazar-Campillo & Codina-Espurz, 2018). As with openings, sometimes the pre-closing formula may be omitted, and thus the email ends with only the sender's name.

Bunz and Campbell (2004) identified some verbal markers (*please*, *thank you*) and structural elements in the form of salutations or closings as indicators of politeness. According to these authors, emails which do not include such structural elements result in abrupt and thus less polite exchanges. Their research showed that email recipients were able to accommodate to emails they had received which included politeness indicators by sending emails which also had similar verbal markers and structural elements.

Despite the fact that some research has been conducted on address forms and degree of imposition in emails (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018) and elements in the email and politeness (Salazar-Campillo & Codina-Espurz, 2018), to the best of our knowledge, no research has examined the use of second-person pronouns of address by Spanish students in their emails to faculty in a three-email chain. For this reason, the present study aims at making a contribution to the area of address forms in Spanish by analysing the use of *tú* and *usted* in email exchanges between students and professors. Our second goal is to examine the verbal markers and structural elements in the emails to show politeness. The following research questions are put forward:

RQ1: Which pronoun of address do students use in first-contact and follow-up emails?
RQ2: Are verbal markers and structural elements present in students' first-contact and follow-up emails as signals of politeness?

3. THE STUDY

3.1 *Subjects and data collection*

Forty requestive emails sent to a female associate professor at a small Spanish university are the corpus for the study. The emails dealt with topics related to an MA program in teaching and learning English. They are part of a chain of interaction consisting of, at least, (1) the student's first-contact email, (2) the professor's response, and (3) the student's follow-up email. All interactions were initiated by the students, who were native speakers of Peninsular Spanish.

Since there was no background information of the students, we cannot report on their linguistic repertoire, that is, what other languages they spoke, apart from Spanish (their L1) and English (a B2 level was required for registering in the MA program). The emails contained a request with varying degrees of imposition: a low degree was considered if the student asked for a face-to-face appointment or for information (n=36). In turn, imposition was considered high in those cases in which, for example, students asked for enrolment in the MA program after the deadline (n=4).

Thirty-five emails were sent by graduate students and 5 by undergraduates. As for gender, 7 emails were written by male students and 33 by females. For ethical reasons, after having collected the forty emails, senders were contacted by the professor who asked their permission to use their emails for the present investigation. All of them consented, provided that their names were changed for pseudonyms or deleted.

3.2 Data analysis

For the purposes of the present study, we analysed the use of *tú* or *usted* in the students' first and follow-up emails and also the presence of verbal indicators (e.g., *Por favor*, *Gracias*) in line with Bunz and Campbell's (2004) research. Structural elements such as openings (*Buenos días*) and closings (*Saludos*) were examined following Salazar-Campillo and Codina-Espurz's (2018) typology for the analysis of openings (Table 1) and closings (Table 2).

*Table 1: **Typology of openings in emails (Salazar-Campillo & Codina-Espurz, 2018)** [1]*

OPENINGS								
	A	Salutation: Greeting + Address term						
		Code	Greeting/term of deference		Title	First name	Last name	Example
− Degree of formality +	1	GE+T+FN+LN	x		x	x	x	Dear Dr. (professor's first name and last name)
	2	GE+T+LN	x		x		x	Dear Dr. (professor's last name)
	3	GE+T+FN	x		x	x		Dear Dr. (professor's first name)
	4	T+FN+LN			x	x	x	Dr. (professor's first name and last name)
	5	T+LN			x		x	Dr. (professor's last name)
	6	T+FN			x	x		Dr. (professor's first name)
	7	GE+T	x		x			Dear Professor

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[1] Although the examples in Tables 1 and 2 are originally in English, for data coding, Spanish counterparts or analogous expressions have been used.

	Code	Greeting/term of deference	Title	First name	Last name	Example
8	T		x			Professor
9	GE+FN+LN	x		x	x	Dear (professor's first and last name)
10	GE+LN	x			x	Dear (professor's last name)
11	GE+FN	x		x		Dear/Hello (professor's first name)
12	GE	x				Hello, Good afternoon
13	FN+LN			x	x	(professor's first name and last name)
14	LN				x	(last name)
15	FN			x		(professor's first name)
16	Ø	-		-	-	-	(no salutation)
B	Pleasantry (gratitude, apology, etc.)					*I hope this email finds you well*
C	Identification of self					sender's identification

In the above table, a classification of possible ways to open an email is presented, which is by no means exhaustive. Three main moves are observed: the Salutation, which consists of a greeting plus and address term, the Pleasantry (a polite social comment to the recipient) and the Identification of self, a highly expected move, especially in first-contact emails. Table 2 offers a typology of closings which embraces three main elements: the Pre-closing statement, in which the sender indicates the readiness to finish his/her email, the Complimentary close (a formulaic and conventional closing move), and the Signature, which includes the sender's first name and/or last name.

*Table 2: **Typology of closings in emails (Salazar-Campillo & Codina-Espurz, 2018)***

		CLOSINGS
A	Pre-closing statement	Example
	Apology	*Sorry for the inconvenience*
	Gratitude	*Thanks for your help*
	Appeal	*Looking forward to hearing from you*
B	Complimentary close	*(Kind)Regards*
C	Signature	Student's first name and/or last name

3.3 *Results and discussion*

RQ1 asked about which pronouns of address students would use in their emails. As can be observed in Table 3, students opted for the informal pronoun *tú* in half of their first-contact emails, and in the remaining 50% they used *usted*. In the follow-up emails, the use of *tú* accounts for over 70% of the emails whereas *usted* diminishes to 27.5%. Our findings thus suggest that formality decreases as students respond to their professor in their follow-up emails.

*Table 3: **Distribution of pronouns in the students' first-contact and follow-up emails***

Emails (*n* = 40)	First-contact email		Follow-up email	
	tú	*usted*	*tú*	*usted*
	20 (50%)	20 (50%)	29 (72.5%)	11 (27.5%)

We further analysed any shift of pronoun in the students' emails from their first one to the follow-up email. As Table 4 illustrates, it is worth noting the fact that half of the emails showed consistency in the use of *tú* in both first-contact and follow-up emails, that is, if students had opted for *tú* in their first email, they also used it in the follow-up email (see Examples 1a and 1b). As for the use of *usted*, only 11 emails showed the same consistency (Examples 2a and b), and on 9 occasions students shifted from *usted* in the first-contact email to *tú* in the follow-up email. This change of pronoun took place in a time span from a few minutes to 12 hours between the professor's reply to their follow-up email (see Examples 3a and b).

*Table 4: **Shift of pronoun in students' first-contact and follow-up emails***

Emails (*n* = 40)	First-contact email > Follow-up email		
	tú > tú	*usted >usted*	*usted> tú*
	20 (50%)	11 (27.5%)	9 (22.5%)

(1a) (first-contact email):[2]
  Buenas tardes (professor's first name) (Good afternoon (professor's first name))
  Soy (student's full name), *nuevo alumno del máster… ¿Podrías confirmarme si todo está bien?* (I'm (student's full name), a new student from the MA programme… Could you confirm everything is ok?)
  Muchas gracias y disculpa las molestias (Many thanks and sorry for the inconvenience)
  Un saludo, (Regards)
  Student's first name

(1b) (follow-up email):
  Perfecto (professor's first name) (Perfect (professor's first name))
  Muchas gracias y disculpa las molestias (Many thanks and sorry for the inconvenience)
  Un saludo, (Regards)
  Student's first name

(2a) (first-contact email):
  Buenos días Doña (professor's first name)*,* (Good morning Ms (professor's first name))
  Me pongo en contacto con usted para ver la posibilidad… (I'm contacting you about the possibility to…)

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[2] Emails have been transcribed as they were sent to the professor, so punctuation or capitalization errors may occur.

Muchas gracias por su atención. (Many thanks for your attention)
Un saludo (Regards)
Student's full name

(2b) (follow-up email):

Hola (professor's first name), (Hello (professor's first name),
Me gustaría saber si ya hice la preinscripción, (...) por si pudiera comprobarlo. (I'd like to know if I pre-registered, (…), if you could check it.
Muchas gracias, (Many thanks)
Un saludo. (Regards.)
Student's full name

(3a) (first-contact email):
¡Buenos días! (Good morning!)
Mi nombre es (student's full name) *y acabo de comprobar que….* (My name is (student's full name) and I have just checked that…
¿Podría informarme qué debo hacer…? (Could you inform me about what I should do…?)
Gracias y un saludo. (Thanks and regards.)
(3b) (follow-up email):
¡Buenas tardes! Efectivamente tengo mi certificación de B2… por favor dime de qué manera os lo debo hacer llegar. (Good afternoon. I have my B2 certificate indeed… please tell me how I have to send it to you)
Un saludo, (Regards,)

Our findings partly support previous research which pointed to the growing preference for the use of *tú* in student-to-faculty communication (Blas-Arroyo, 1994-1995), which tends to erase social hierarchy. In this line, as stated by Baron over 20 years ago: "email and contemporary writing, more generally, tend to be characterized by informality of style…" (Baron, 2001: 5). As illustrated in Table 3 above, in half of the first-contact emails of the present study the students addressed their professor with *tú*, denoting a sense of familiarity and/or intimacy. However, the remaining 50% opted for *usted*, thus showing politeness and deference to the recipient. These results are similar to Níkleva (2018), who reported that the use of *usted* was slightly over 50% in her email corpus. In the same vein, Níkleva and Nuñez (2013) had already observed that nearly 80% of students in their corpus used *usted* in students' emails to their professors, a percentage which reached 100% when asked what form of address they would employ when sending emails to faculty.

In line with Vela-Delfa's (2018) findings, when email interaction extends beyond the sequence student's initial email-professor's reply, address forms tend to become more familiar. As Table 4 shows, in 9 follow-up emails students moved from *usted* to *tú*, indicating a closer degree of familiarity with the professor once the first contact has been established. These findings are also in line with Betti's (2013) study, which showed that her Spanish corpus employed a very informal style with an extensive use of *tú*.

In order to answer RQ2, we focused on the occurrence of politeness markers in the emails. As for verbal indicators (see Table 5), over 80% of first-contact and follow-up emails included (*Muchas*) *Gracias*, a finding which is in stark contrast to some other research (i.e., Níkleva, 2018) which reported the almost inexistent use of this indicator. Only two occurrences of *Por favor* (Please), were found in our data (one in a first-contact email and another one in a follow-up email, both requests for information), thus supporting Níkleva's (2018) findings

about its minimal use when students request information and not on other occasions (for example, grade-related problems). On the contrary, some other research (Aribi, 2017) emphasizes this formulaic expression as a way to express politeness. The same percentage of lack of verbal indication of politeness was obtained in first-contact and follow-up emails (17.5%), despite the fact that the emails focused on a request and thus some degree of gratitude was expected.

*Table 5: **Distribution of verbal indicators in the students' first-contact and follow-up emails***

Emails (*n* = 40)	Verbal indicators	
	First-contact email	Follow-up email
	Gracias (n=33; 82.5%) Ø (n=7; 17.5%)	*Gracias* (n=33; 82.5%) Ø (n=7; 17.5%)

Not surprisingly, the percentages in Table 5 for the thanking expression *Gracias* are the same, as the students who thanked the professor did so in both of their emails. Likewise, those who did not use a thanking formula did not do so in any of their emails. *Gracias* (and its various forms of intensification) usually appeared in the pre-closing statement in the first-contact email and after the salutation in the follow-up email, thus thanking the professor for the action the students had requested (see Examples 4a and b):

(4a) (first-contact email):
    Estimada Dra. (professor's first name), (Dear Dr. (professor's first name))
    Hoy he consultado los resultados… (Today I have looked at the results…)
    Gracias por su atención. (Thanks for your attention.)
    Un saludo, (Regards,)
    (Student's full name)

(4b) (follow-up email):

    Gracias por su rápida respuesta.... (Thanks for your quick reply…)
    Un saludo, (Regards,)

It is interesting to note that only one email included the expression *Gracias por adelantado* ('Thank you in advance') in the closing move, which may threaten the recipient's negative face as it presupposes that the request will be granted (Havertake, 1994).

The second marker of politeness examined in the students' emails were the structural elements. As previously stated, these refer to the general layout of the emails, which may add a formal tone to the request. The distribution of these elements in the emails are illustrated in Table 6 for openings and in Table 7 for closings.

*Table 6: **Opening moves in the students' first-contact and follow-up emails***

A. Salutation	First-contact email	Follow-up email
Greeting Expression + First Name	18 (45%)	19 (47.5%)
Greeting Expression	15 (37.5%)	6 (15%)
Greeting Expression + Title	2 (5%)	0
Greeting Expression + Title + Last Name	1 (2.5%)	0
Greeting Expression + Title + First Name	1 (2.5%)	0
Greeting Expression + Title + First Name + Last Name	1 (2.5%)	0

No salutation		2 (5%)	13 (32.5%)
Title + Last Name		0	1 (2.5%)
First Name		0	1 (2.5%)
B.	Pleasantry	1 (2.5%)	0
C.	Identification of self	25 (62.5%)	0

*Table 7: **Closing moves in the students' first-contact and follow-up emails***

		First-contact email	Follow-up email
A.	Pre-closing statement	35 (87.5%)	24 (60%)
B.	Complimentary close	30 (75%)	30 (75%)
C.	Signature	34 (85%)	22 (55%)

Table 6 shows that in both types of emails, the preferred form of salutation is Greeting Expression + First Name. The use of the professor's first name in first-contact emails may be regarded as informal, and it is not the expected salutation in academic contexts. This degree of informality may be better explained in the follow-up emails, as the professor, when replying to the students' first-contact email, signed with her first name. A greeting expression is also commonly employed in first-contact emails, together with a variety of other possibilities, including the use of a title and the professor's first or full name. On the contrary, it is noteworthy to point out that in only one follow-up mail a title was used, and in 13 of the students' second mail no salutation, pleasantry or signature was included. These findings may suggest that after the professor's response, the students merely sent their follow-up email focusing on the transactional use of their emails, ignoring most markers of politeness. Therefore, the absence of a pleasantry and the identification of self by means of the signature in the follow-up email is somehow an expected finding, since they are elements which should be present in the first contact, especially the student's identification, as occurred in 62.5% of first-contact emails.

The tendency to greater informality in the follow-up emails can also be perceived in the closing move, as shown in Table 7. The students used the three elements extensively in the closings (i.e., pre-closing statement, complimentary close and signature) in the first-contact email; however, they were used to a lesser extent in the follow-up email, especially in the case of signatures (55%). We believe that some structural elements may not be used by students in their follow-up email due to the fact that the thread of discourse focuses on content, as already mentioned in the case of openings.

Some research (Frehner, 2008) has claimed that the shorter the delay between emails, the more synchronous communication becomes. Probably, the short time lapse in the online exchanges under study may have favoured fewer openings and a shorter array of salutations in the follow-up emails (see Table 8). In this line, the students' use of smartphones instead of laptops when replying to emails may be an important element to take into consideration in the analysis of structural elements of emails, pointing to a quick dialogic interaction which overrides the conventions of more formal communication (Vela-Delfa, 2018). In this sense, this author claimed that no openings are employed when messages are sent via smartphones, a fact that may add to greater informality in student-faculty communication. Still, in the present study, there was no indication in the emails that they were sent via smartphone or laptop, so this issue deserves further examination.

*Table 8: **Time span between the professor's reply and the students' follow-up email***

	N
Up to 30 min	8 emails
30 min to 3 hours	10 emails
4 to 12 hours	6 emails
1 to 2 days	9 emails
3 days to 1 week	5 emails
Over 1 week	2 emails

It is interesting to note that in the most immediate follow-up emails (that is, those which took place within a few minutes and three hours after the professor's response; n=18, or 45%), students included a form of salutation and a closing in 10 cases; thus still showing deference to the recipient despite the short time span. In the remaining follow-up emails, 2 only had a salutation, 3 only included a closing, always in the form of a thanking expression for the information or help provided, and 3 emails did not include either a salutation or a closing. Our findings partly support previous claims (e.g., Crystal, 2001; Frehner, 2008) on the grounds that, due to the fact that emails approximate synchronous interaction, successive emails tend to leave out greetings and farewells. We have found that students' follow-up emails did contain structural elements despite the overly immediacy of the exchanges. Most likely, the institutional context of the interaction may have resulted in a continued sign of deference on students' part.

Bou-Franch (2011) found that most emails in her Peninsular Spanish corpus had opening sections, and all of them included a closing in students' first-contact email. Our findings support her research on the more stable use of closings in students' first-contact and follow-up emails when compared to openings, thus showing more distance or respect towards the recipient. Although some research (e.g., Aribi, 2017) reported closings as a necessary component in emails sent to faculty members, Zarei and Mohammadi (2012) found frequent absence of closings in emails, a fact that made students' emails abrupt, informal and impolite. This degree of informality may point to transfer from features in social media platforms such as Instagram or WhatsApp, as recently suggested by Shaitan and Zakhidova (2021).

4. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

In academic contexts, emails have become the most common way of communication between students and faculty. However, pragmatic failure may occur in this type of interactions if students do not follow the expected politeness conventions, especially in first-contact emails. This study has provided some insight into the use of second-pronoun forms of address, verbal markers and structural elements in email communication in the academic context.

The use of the formal pronoun *usted* is a signal of the uneven distribution of power and the hierarchical structure of academic communication between students and professors. The results deriving from our corpus of spontaneous emails reveal that Spanish students opt for showing more solidarity to their recipient (by means of using *tú*) regardless of the expected deference due to power asymmetry (Moreno, 2003). By employing *tú* in their first-contact email, students may sound inadvertently impolite, a tone which is further exacerbated by the switch to *tú* after the initial email. This may be due to the fact that students may feel insecure about how to encode their email politely when hierarchical relationships are at stake, even in their L1. Therefore, students do not appear to proceed cautiously in their first-contact emails to faculty with respect to the use of *tú*. This important lack of deference deserves teaching not

only in their L1, but also and more importantly, in the foreign language where other sociopragmatic rules may apply, as previous studies have already pointed out (Níkleva, 2018).

The verbal marker *Gracias* was extensively used in both first-contact and follow-up emails because of the requestive nature of the emails the students sent. Despite the fact that the degree of imposition of the request was low, the students may have felt compelled to show gratitude to the professor and did so accordingly to show politeness. The low imposition of requests may also explain the minimal use of the verbal marker *Por favor*, as it was one of the professor's tasks to provide information when requested.

The analysis of the structural elements points to a high use of a greeting expression and the professor's first name as the salutation in the first-contact email. This outcome is related to the findings of our first research question, as the use of the professor's first name goes hand in hand with the informal address pronoun *tú* in the body of the email. Students' identification of self in the first-contact email also abounds; however, its use dramatically diminishes in the students' follow-up email, as it is no longer necessary to state who they are due to the rapid exchange of emails. In regards to closings, politeness is shown in both types of emails, since, although to a lesser extent in the follow-up email, the three parts of closings are present.

Limitations regarding, on the one hand, the small number of emails and, on the other, the Spanish variety (Peninsular Spanish) have to be mentioned, among others. A bigger sample could corroborate students' use of *tú* vs *usted* when addressing their professors for the first time. In addition, other varieties of Spanish (i.e., Argentinian, etc.) could complement our findings.

Gender may be one of the many factors which govern the choice between *tú* and *usted*. Although gender differences were observed by Punyanunt-Carter and Hemby (2006) in the sense that males were more indirect and mitigated more in their email messages, the inclusion of gender in the use of pronouns is needed due to the scarcity of research (Aguilar-Sánchez, 2019). However, the analysis of gender of both senders and recipient was out of the scope of the present study. Differences in sender's and recipient's age should also be taken into account as it has been pointed out (Blas-Arroyo, 1994-1995) that the use of either *tú* or *usted* may be affected by the generation gap between interlocutors. In the same line, some previous research has shown that formality increases when the addressee is an older professor (i.e., Níkleva, 2018). This is a variable which undoubtedly needs further research, along with seniority of the recipient, which may influence students' degree of formality in their emails.

As for further investigation in terms of structural elements, it would be desirable to examine the time span between the first and subsequent mails in order to find out whether or not those elements are still used. In this sense, as Dürscheid and Frehner (2013) claim, a rapid exchange of emails may resemble oral dialogue, resulting in a lack of openings or closings in a thread of student-faculty interaction.

Some pedagogical implications arise from the present study. Firstly, it is important to make students (and especially, university students for their extensive use of emails to communicate with their professors) aware of the need to write emails appropriately bearing in mind the uneven relationship in terms of status and power. Secondly, not teaching university students how to address the recipient formally may have a negative impact on their future professional career, showing a potentially negative impression of themselves, as claimed by Wilson (2005). In this sense, some classroom proposals for writing polite emails have already been suggested (e.g., Krulatz & Park, 2016; Codina-Espurz & Salazar-Campillo, 2019), thus enhancing the development of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competence in academic contexts.

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