Writing Business Emails in English as a Lingua Franca - how informal can you be?

An analysis of formality in BELF emails

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Abstract

As a result of globalisation, the number of companies working globally is increasing at an unprecedented pace. Consequently, the need to communicate with people from other countries is getting bigger. In such intercultural communication, a common language must be used to interact. The language of choice is most often English, which is the business lingua franca (BELF) today. Furthermore, email has become the obvious choice of medium when interacting with foreign business associates. The present study was conducted through intensive and extensive analyses, investigating BELF emails written by 21 individuals with 14 different native languages. The data consists of 209 emails. The study follows Bjørge’s (2007) work on formality in emails written in academic settings. The aim of the study was to determine how formal the participants were in greetings and closings and whether they accommodated their language to the respondent. The results suggest that the level of formality mainly depends on the purpose of the email and, to some extent, how formal the correspondent is. The accommodation to the correspondent seems to be individual. The present study wishes to extend knowledge on email communication in BELF settings. The results are likely to be relevant for teachers and students of Business Communication and English as a Second or Foreign Language along with managers in internationally functioning companies, especially as regards what should be considered in BELF communication.

Keywords

Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF), formality, business email communication, greetings, closings.
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1. Introduction

Ever since people began communicating with people from other speech communities than their own, different languages have been used as lingua francas, i.e. common languages shared by the interlocutors (Meierkord, 2012, p. 12). So far, there have been a few major lingua francas in the world, such as Spanish, Arabic and Russian. The dominant lingua franca today is, however, English, used globally for communication between people of different mother tongues. As a result, there are now more second language (L2) speakers of English than there are first/native language (L1) speakers (Meierkord, 2012, p. 42). Research on English lingua franca (ELF) was initiated in the early 80’s (Meierkord, 2012, p. 13) but gained ground in the beginning of the 21st century. Since then, ELF has obtained great interest by scholars, especially due to international interactions by people from different linguistic backgrounds, not only from countries within Kachru’s Outer circle1, but also within the Expanding circle (Meierkord, 2012).

Many studies have been conducted on ELF in different domains, such as academia (e.g. Björkman, 2014; Mauranen, 2006; Evans & Morrison, 2011), and in a more general sense, people’s everyday use of ELF in social environments (e.g. Baumgarten & House, 2010; Meierkord, 2004). In recent years, the interest in English lingua franca in the business domain has increased, along with the number of companies who work globally. According to the figures from 2010, approximately 90 per cent of the English business communication in the world was performed with non-native speakers (NNS) participating (Pullin, 2010, p. 457).

Nowadays, companies often have agencies located in different parts of the world and foreign customers around the globe, leading to the necessity of having employees who are proficient in other languages than their L1s (Meierkord, 2012, p. 145). For this reason, a mutual language is required for the correspondents to communicate. The language of choice for international business communication is most often English, termed Business English Lingua Franca (BELF) (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Meierkord, 2012). Exemplifying this, a study conducted at a German company concluded that English proficiency is often essential in order to be employed and to be able to perform at the workplace (Ehrenreich, 2010). Furthermore, lack of language skills might affect one’s involvement in meetings and decision making (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005). In addition, English is often used as a corporate language in national companies (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012). Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) report of two different studies of internal communication where the companies used either English or multiple corporation languages. The studies suggest that one mutual language is preferable instead of several corporate languages.

Not only the language is affected by the globalisation but also the means for communicating. Email is today a common medium for communicating with business

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1 Kachru’s circles illustrate the spread of English in the world. The Inner Circle illustrates countries where English is the mother tongue of most residents. The Outer Circle illustrates countries where English is used as an official language in certain domains but does not function as a mother tongue. The Expanding Circle illustrates countries where English is not an official or native language but is still often used by the residents when communicating with foreigners. (Melchers & Shaw, 2011)
associates. Approximately 80 per cent of the business communication were estimated to be conducted via email in 2002 (Grosse in Davis, Leas & Dobelman, 2009) and presumably the numbers have increased since then. Kankaanranta (2006) studied BELF in internal email communication between Swedes and Finns, nations who previously communicated in Swedish but today mostly use English. Although there were grammar mistakes in the emails studied, misunderstandings rarely occurred. Moreover, the participants occasionally were influenced by their L1s in their English writing. Similar findings were made in a study of lexical variations in business emails written in English by NNSs. The L2 speakers showed less variation influenced by their mother tongue than did the foreign language (FL) speakers (Carrió Pastor & Muñiz Calderón, 2012). Having established that, it is implied that English linguistic variations in international business communication are still under researched (see Carrió Pastor & Muñiz Calderón, 2012). In addition, research should be done in authentic intercultural interactions, such as real-life email communication, in order to get new perspectives on this type of business communication (Incelli, 2013).

Greetings and closings in email communication have been researched on by e.g. Bjørge (2007) and Bou-Franch (2011) in the academic discourse, Waldvogel (2007) in the workplace discourse and Gains (1999) in both discourses. The findings were similar in all four studies, namely that the participants showed a vast diversity in how often they used greetings and closings. Moreover, the participants were diverse in which types of greetings and closings they used and Bjørge (2007) noticed that NNSs showed a wider range of diversity than did NSs.

As a continuation on the above studies, foremost Bjørge (2007), the present study focused on authentic internal and external English communication performed in emails written by NNSs with one exception, in order to investigate how formal the correspondents were in greetings and closings. The findings were then compared on an individual, organisational and cultural level in order to determine which aspects influenced the formality in the emails. Since emails have more or less overtaken previous business communication means (Giménez-Moreno & Skorczynska, 2013) and since emails display characteristics from spoken language (see Incelli, 2013) it is interesting to investigate whether written business correspondence still is quite formal or if emails have entailed a more informal way of writing in business context. The present paper specifically sought the answers to the research questions below.

1.1 Research questions

1. How formal are BELF users when they write business emails?
2. Do BELF users accommodate their language to each other or do they use their own personal style in writing?

2. Background

2.1 (Business) English Lingua Franca

The term English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is a functional term, referring to communication in a common language between speakers of different mother tongues. Many scholars use the term to describe communication between NNSs exclusively (see
Kaur, 2011, p. 97) while other researchers maintain that native speakers (NSs) should be included in ELF research (Jenkins, 2011, p. 928). For this study, NSs will be included for three reasons: NSs communicating with NNSs might have to adjust their language with consideration to the NNSs English proficiency, thus using a type of ELF (Jenkins, 2011, p. 928); ELF refers not only to communication between people of different L1s but also to the interaction between people from different nationalities (Bjørge, 2007, p. 62); the data collected for the study includes one NS, involved in a conversation with two NNSs.

In ELF communication, the primary aim is to reach mutual intelligibility between the interlocutors (Kaur, 2011). The language proficiency often differs between the interlocutors, being from different L1 backgrounds and influenced by different cultural and pragmatic values (Melchers & Shaw, 2011, p. 202). Under these circumstances, there might be some obstacles to overcome. However, misunderstandings usually do not occur due to lack of language proficiency (e.g. Mauranen, 2006; Kaur, 2011). Mauranen (2006) found that misunderstandings in ELF settings are not as frequent as anticipated and when they do occur, one common reason is pragmatic issues. Many misunderstandings are not related to ELF settings but can occur for reasons also found in speech between NSs, for instance ambiguity, mishearing or slips of the tongue (see Kaur, 2011).

Mauranen (2006) noticed an extensive will to prevent misunderstandings by self-repairs. Björkman (2014), in addition to providing a framework of communicative strategies (CSs), noticed frequent use of CSs such as making a statement more explicit (e.g. through repetition, simplification and paraphrasing); clarification strategies; and confirmation checks.

Since the present study investigates communication in business settings, the term that will be referred to henceforth is BELF (Louhiala-Salminen, et al. 2005). In BELF communication, the main goal is to get the job done (see Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013). Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) state that the proficiency level does not alone determine whether one is competent in BELF communication or not. It is equally important to be able to accommodate the other party and to reach mutual understanding, which can be done by using the language in a strategic way. Furthermore, sufficient English skills in order to get the job done is enough to be BELF competent (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010).

Pullin (2010) argues for the importance of small talk in the workplace in order to establish relations and gain understanding for other cultures, which are other important aspects in BELF communication. This understanding is equally important for NSs as for NNSs, as NSs often lack the ability to accommodate NNSs (Ehrenreich, 2010, p. 422). Moreover, NSs could benefit from learning what to consider when interacting with NNSs, e.g. how to simplify their language and to understand different accents and other features noticeable in NNSs speech (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012, p. 267) as BELF displays a hybrid of features from both speakers’ native languages (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). A study on accommodation strategies in business meetings showed that people in intercultural settings try hard to understand each other and to reach intelligibility, for instance by using a “let it pass”-strategy (established by Firth, 1996), formal and “careful” speech (Rogerson-Revell, 2010).
In a study conducted in China about business professionals’ perception of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) students’ texts in different genres, the findings suggested that business professionals are positive to the texts produced by students. However, the professionals expressed some concerns about the accuracy in students’ writing (Zhang, 2013). Moreover, a project in Intercultural Business Communication (IBC) education helped the students become more aware of the pragmatics of foreign language and business, by observing and analysing authentic IBC. The students had the opportunity to be part of business communication activities within different genres. The project provided the students with higher competence within IBC settings (Planken, van Hooft & Korzilius, 2004). This is in line with Kankaanranta’s and Louhiala-Salminen’s (2013) suggestions that business students should learn business practices through e.g. case studies imitating issues which might occur in real life. There is a gap between education and the workplace which can be decreased through ESP education and perhaps in particular through genre knowledge since diversity exists in the workplace (see Zhang, 2013). Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2007) imply that, as there are no standard norms in BELF communication, more research needs to be carried out in order to benefit business communication education (p. 58).

### 2.2 Email communication in intercultural business settings

Emails are messages of varied length and purpose transferred through computer systems. Consequently, they are probably more diverse than their precursor business letters. Nearly all computer-mediated communication serves to achieve a certain goal (Leech & Weisser, 2003). The purpose and the audience of a specific email might influence the linguistic features used when writing it and should be considered when formulating the message (Crystal, 2006, p. 11). Email and other Internet discourses are considered to have characteristics from not only written language but also spoken language (see Incelli, 2013), called “written speech” by some scholars, e.g. Elmer-Dewitt (1994) (in Crystal, 2006, p. 26-27).

Nowadays, email is the general medium for both internal and external business communication. It is often used in circumstances that earlier would occur in face-to-face meetings or telephone calls (see Giménez-Moreno & Skorczyńska, 2013; Bjørge, 2007). Kankaanranta (2006) found three genres in email correspondence between colleagues in Sweden and Finland, namely: providing information about the corporation (“Noticeboard”); sending documents either for feedback or for information (“Postman”); and exchanging information about the corporation between coworkers (“Dialogue”). Furthermore, Gains (1999) found three functions in the commercial emails he studied, using Ghadessy’s and Webster’s (1988) classifications, namely “Informative, Request(ive), or Directive” (Gains, 1999, p. 83).

In email communication, quick replies are often expected and the communicative events often occur in a faster pace than in many other written means, leading to less time for consideration (Crystal, 2006). Emails are therefore somewhat more informal than previous means, for instance fax or business letters. Consequently, they often contain misspellings and other typing errors (Crystal, 2006, p. 112). Moreover, fast typing and lack of proofreading lead to more distinct variations in the language (Carrió Pastor & Muñiz Calderón, 2012, p. 5). None of these errors, however, usually have any effect on intelligibility. One reason for this might be that business emails often follow a certain pattern or standard in terms of vocabulary, as they need to be intelligible for everyone.
Therefore, it might be easier to interpret what the writer intended with the message although errors exist.

In business settings, language or typing errors can be offensive to the correspondent and can, at worst, damage the relationship between business associates (Davis et al., 2009). The computer can be of some help for the writer when linguistic issues occur (Leech & Weisser, 2003), but in order to avoid misunderstandings and negative impact on the business relationship it is important to be thorough when writing business emails. However, Jensen (2009) found that the correspondents in her study were very forgiving in terms of typing errors. Hence, miscommunication does not necessarily affect the business.

Linguistic variations in BELF emails do not only occur due to fast typing and difference in proficiency. It can also be influenced by the writer’s L1 and cultural norms or by strategies used for e.g. intelligibility and rapport-building. In a study of business email communication between Chinese (FL speakers) and Pakistani (L2 speakers) correspondents, the FL speakers showed influences of their L1 to a greater extent than the L2 speakers, as did they show a greater variation in their writing in general. Furthermore, the authors could distinguish a particular courtesy by the Chinese who changed their first names so that the respondents would comprehend it (Carrió Pastor & Muñiz Calderón, 2012).

2.2.1 Formality in emails

Being a fairly new medium, email has not been set with any specific rules in terms of formality in contrast to its counterpart business letters (Bjørge, 2007, p. 64), and is often rather informal in its form even when performed in business contexts. Kankaanranta (2006) found three guidelines in the studied business emails which were; “(a) Make the main point early, (b) make it explicitly, and (c) make the recipient feel good.” (p. 222). These guidelines seemed to help achieve effective communication.

Guidebooks on how to write emails state that they should be more standardised and not too formal, recommending abbreviations and short forms. Greetings such as Dear Sir are considered outdated. Nevertheless, they do warn about differences between cultures (Crystal, 2006). Crystal (2006) also warns about differences between age, personality, occupation and social background. In BELF settings, age, personality and similar aspects might be difficult to consider as they might be unknown to the correspondents who often have a geographically distant business relation, but culture should be considered in order to establish and maintain a good relationship and to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

The level of formality in emails can be established through several different aspects. For instance, the style in greetings and closings reflects the formality in the conversation. The way one addresses the recipient in written communication reflects the perception of the correspondents’ relationship. Greetings and closings can furthermore be used to build rapport with the recipient (see Bjørge, 2007). They are opportunities to distance oneself or express closeness to the recipient, which otherwise can be difficult to express in emails. Moreover, greetings and closings are politeness markers (see Waldvogel, 2007). Hence, greetings and closings can give a fair amount of information about the correspondents’ relationship and how high or low formality they perceive is acceptable when communicating with people from other nations, whom they may or may not know
personally. This also applies to non-intercultural conversations. Regarding closings, many companies have pre-set email signatures which end every email, containing the name of the sender, the company’s name and contact information. These signatures might increase the level of formality. However, each individual has the choice not to insert the signature in each email and instead formulate their own closing, or to insert both a personal ending and the company’s signature.

Kankaanranta (2006) suggests, by comparing her results to previous research, that NNSs use greetings and closings more frequently than American NSs which could be explained by memos being more common in the U.S. than in Scandinavia, thus NNSs use features from business letters. Furthermore, in a comparison of email writing between three European countries, namely British, Polish and Spanish, differences were found in the frequency of greetings regardless of the emails’ formality. Closings were more similar in frequency than greetings were, with a few exceptions in informal emails (Giménez-Moreno & Skorczynska, 2013). Other studies that have investigated the frequency of greetings in comparison to closings indicate that greetings in general are less frequent than closings (see Bou-Franch, 2011; Waldvogel, 2007; Gains, 1999).

To evaluate formality in email writing, one can also analyse directness, rapport-building and politeness strategies, which are all aspects that can be viewed differently depending on culture (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Moreover, informal features that often occur in emails, due to the short time frame in the writing events, are for instance: “unconventional use of punctuation, capitalization and spelling”; “short or fragmented utterances/sentences”; “simple syntactic structures”; “adjacency pairs” etc. (Giménez-Moreno & Skorczynska, 2013, p. 83-84). Jensen (2009) also found that the emails in her study became more personal in terms of pronouns as the business relationship evolved.

As stated previously, emails can to some extent be compared to spoken language. However, one major difference is that intonation and body language cannot be expressed by letters. This led to the development of smileys or emoticons, which are images or signs showing facial expressions that can help the writer to express emotions in texts. It is, however, important to use them correctly since they can lead to misunderstandings if used inappropriately (Crystal, 2006, p. 38-39).

According to Angell and Heslop (1994), “smiley ‘are the equivalent of e-mail slang and should not be used in formal business e-mail messages.’ ” (cited in Crystal, 2006, p. 129). Nevertheless, smileys can be seen in business emails these days. Crystal (2006) suggests that personal attitudes were easier expressed by phrasing in business letters because there was more time to consider how to formulate the text, while in email writing there is not as much time for consideration, thus smileys were introduced. (p. 41). Crystal (2006) anticipated that smileys would decrease over time as people got more used to expressing themselves in internet writing (p. 42), which can be questioned now some nine years later. The frequency has probably not decreased but the way they are used might have changed and nowadays the introductory smileys have been exchanged to pictures of faces which can be seen regularly on the Internet.

In the present study, following Bjørge’s (2007) research, the greetings and closings have been investigated and further analysed. Previous research on (B)ELF email

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2 Kankaanrantas’ (2006) study was made with Finnish and Swedish participants.

3 Smileys were initially written with keyboard signs, for example :-) :-( but are increasingly exchanged to the emoticon pictures, for instance 😊.
communication has often been narrowed down to a small number of business contexts or nationalities, using emails written by people from two or three L1s (see Davis et al., 2009, p. 74). One exception is however Bjørge (2007) and, similarly, the present study has included several different mother tongues from companies within different lines of business in the analyses (see also Waldvogel, 2007). The purpose of investigating emails with this approach is to extend research on how formal or informal NNSs are when using BELF in writing and how well they accommodate the correspondents’ linguistic and cultural norms.

3. Data and method

3.1 The data

The present study was conducted using naturally-occurring data. A total of 209 real-life emails, from 13 conversations with 21 correspondents, were collected through four contacts working for different globally functioning companies. The four contacts all work in offices positioned in Sweden. The conversations were divided into four sets, each containing the emails provided by one contact. The 21 participants work for a total of 14 companies in 11 countries (see Table 1 for an overview).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set</th>
<th>Line of business</th>
<th>Working country</th>
<th>No. of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set 1</td>
<td>Market research</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Home interior</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 2</td>
<td>Online hotel booking site</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hotel chain</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Airline</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 3</td>
<td>Laboratory facility provider</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diagnostic kit manufacturer</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technical solutions provider</td>
<td>Sultanate of Omar</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 4</td>
<td>Human rights</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New Zeeland</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
22 emails (≈10%) in the data set are internal communication between colleagues operating in different parts of the world, whilst the remaining 187 emails (≈90%) are external communication. All data have been anonymised. See Appendix B for examples of the emails. The length of the emails show a vast diversity, with some containing only a few words and some being longer, more informative emails. Examples of the length of the emails during the conversations’ progressions are provided in Table 2. Since they show a vast diversity and no pattern, they will not be further discussed in the results. The length of the conversations is also varied; six conversations comprise 2-5 emails; six conversations comprise 7-15 emails; and one comprise 123 emails.

Table 2. Examples of conversations’ progress of email word length derived from data for the intensive analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set</th>
<th>Email 1</th>
<th>Email 2</th>
<th>Email 3</th>
<th>Email 4</th>
<th>Email 5</th>
<th>Email 6</th>
<th>Email 7</th>
<th>Email 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set 1, conversation 1</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 2, conversation 1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 3, conversation 1</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 3, conversation 2</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 4, conversation 1</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 4, conversation 2</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Participants

The participants are 21 individuals, with 14 different L1s. 17 of the participants are working in their home countries whereas four of them work abroad. The individuals’ names have been changed into pseudonyms. The age and gender of the participants will not be discussed in this study as the limitations of the study does not allow an investigation with such a large amount of variables. Furthermore, information about age would be difficult to access from all participants since the researcher did not have personal contact with all of them and questions about age might be sensitive for some of the contacts to ask their customers. However, what is interesting for the research is the participants’ L1s. Table 3 presents an overview over the participants’ pseudonyms, L1s, working country and how many formal/informal greetings/closings they used in their emails. The presence of formal and informal occurrences will be discussed in sections 4 and 5.

Table 3. The participants organised by data sets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set 1</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Native language</th>
<th>Working country</th>
<th>No. of emails</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Formality</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benito</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Greetings</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Greetings</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Closings</td>
<td>Greetings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>------------</td>
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<td>-----------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monika</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Finnish</td>
<td>England</td>
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<td>Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yafar</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Sultanate of Omar</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Informal</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beda</td>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dieter</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alberto</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julianna (Julia)</td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manya</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All subjects have signed a consent note (see Appendix A), approving that their emails can be used for the study. Other names that are mentioned in the emails or information which might reveal the identity of an individual or a company have been replaced by xxx in the data for ethical reasons. Whenever additional information about the conversations or the participants was needed, questions were sent by email to the researcher’s Swedish contacts. The L1s of the participants have therefore either been provided by the contacts, or assumed by the researcher based on the location where they work and their names, which should be considered when interpreting the results. The only set where assumptions have been made is set 3, as it was more difficult to access this information through this particular contact, although it was provided in some instances. Consequently, it has not been considered whether the participants have more than one L1.

Five of the participants, namely Alberto, Frederik, Jessica, Linda, and Michael, are involved in more than one conversation, hence writing to correspondents in different countries. They can either show a variation in their writing, depending on the receiver, or use the same type of writing in all conversations. Annely has produced the most emails in a long conversation with Michael (and partially Monika) that was conducted over a period of one and a half month, containing both informative emails and short responses.
One thing to keep in mind is that the emails used for the study are in most cases not the very first contact between two correspondents. Some of the business associates established their first contact several years ago which must be considered since there might have been a relationship established already and the level of formality might therefore have been lowered along the way. In most cases however, the length of the acquaintanceship is unknown to the author of this paper. The purpose of the emails, except exchanging information, is instead to maintain a good relationship between the correspondents. The data however consists of one exception where it is important to establish rapport, as it is the first contact between the correspondents.

3. Method

The data was sent to the researcher by email from the four contacts, so no face-to-face meeting took place. Therefore, the procedure in writing the emails and eventual strategies doing so was not observed, as this was not in focus of the study.

In order to answer the two research questions, the analyses were performed in a two-phase approach through extensive and intensive analyses (see Björkman, 2013) by performing extensive analyses with the large amount of data disposable for the study, combined with intensive analyses which can provide an in-depth understanding (Dörnyei, 2007) about how formal business emails are, whether the differences can be derived to the participants’ L1s or if they are individual and if the correspondents follow each others’ norms. What should be kept in mind is that qualitative methods such as intensive analyses show interpretations of the data made by the researcher, possibly influenced by the researcher’s own values (Dörnyei, 2007).

3.3.1 Extensive analyses

For the extensive analyses, all collected data was used. First, all emails were counted, both per conversation and per individual. Second, the number of greetings, closings and email signatures were counted to determine how often they were omitted. Then, the occurrences of each type of greeting and closing were counted and categorised as formal or informal (see Tables 6 and 7). Furthermore, they were counted individually for each participant (see Table 3) to further analyse whether it could be determined if the differences were individual, cultural or related to the companies. The categorisation of formal versus informal greetings and closings was based on Bjørge’s (2007) study, presented in Tables 4 and 5. The results were then compared to Bjørge’s (2007) results, as to see whether the results conform and whether it is possible to assign the formal and informal style to different regions.

As smileys are a rather new feature that can be seen in business emails, and as they affect the formality in the emails, this will be briefly analysed in the extensive analyses as to investigate how often they occur and what their purpose is.

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4 The usage of email signatures will not be discussed further in this paper since they did not show any particular cultural or individual variations (except that they were sometimes omitted).
3.3.2 Intensive analyses

A subset of 66 emails were chosen for the intensive analyses in order to more closely look into how greetings and closings were used depending on context. The data was selected manually using the following criteria: both greetings and closings exist in all conversations, however not necessarily in all emails; all participants are included; and, when possible, they illustrate variation. A series of between two and twelve connected emails were chosen from each conversation. The reason for choosing the fairly high number of twelve emails was to include as much relevant information as possible based on the above criteria. The short conversations, containing 2-3 emails were used in total. The focus of the intensive analyses was the variations of greetings and closings and how they were used, in order to investigate when the participants omit one or the other and how the participants accommodate each other’s formality. The purpose of these analyses was to attempt to determine whether greetings and closings were used only when new topics were incorporated, if no contact had been made for some time or if they were omitted when shortly responding to the previous email.

4. Results

In this section, the results of the analyses are reported. First, the extensive analyses are presented, moving on to the intensive analyses. The sections will quite briefly present the findings from the analyses, as the results and suggestions of the results are further discussed in section 5.
4.1 Extensive analyses

Tables 6 and 7 present the different occurrences of greetings and closings that were found in the emails. Using Bjørge’s (2007) categorisations (Tables 4 and 5), they have been divided into formal and informal occurrences. Greetings and closings found in the data of the present study which were not presented in Bjørge’s (2007) study, for instance abbreviations of *Best regards*, have been categorised as formal or informal by the author of this paper, keeping them as similar as possible to Bjørge’s (2007) distinctions.

Table 6. The occurrences of greetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal greeting</th>
<th>No. of occurrences</th>
<th>Informal greeting</th>
<th>No. of occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dear + First name + Surname</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dear + First name</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear Sir/Madame</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hi + First name</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi</td>
<td></td>
<td>First name</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hola + First name</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hello + First name</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear all</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hey + Firstname</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No greeting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>7 (≈3.5%)</td>
<td><strong>Informal closings</strong></td>
<td>202 (≈96.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. The occurrences of closings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal closings</th>
<th>No. of occurrences</th>
<th>Informal closings</th>
<th>No. of occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Best regards</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Br</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(With) Kind regards</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Rgds</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Best</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>First name</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Regards</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Best greetings</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>All the best</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cheers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thank you</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>We stay in touch/Talk to you soon</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mail signature (without personal closing)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No closing</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>82 (39%)</td>
<td><strong>Informal closings</strong></td>
<td>127 (61%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Table 6, it is clear that informal greetings are considerably more frequent than formal greetings, with 202 informal occurrences in comparison to 7 formal occurrences. The most frequent greetings, which are all informal, are Hi+First name, Dear+First name and the omission of a greeting. Similarly, as Table 7 shows, informal closings are more frequent than formal closings; however, the difference is not as distinctive as with greetings, with 127 and 82 occurrences respectively. Also, the omission of a closing is much more rare than the omission of a greeting (4 and 24 respectively). The most frequent closings are the informal abbreviation of Best regards, namely Br, the formal Kind regards and Best regards. However, it must be taken into consideration that Annely, producer of 92 emails in the data set, is the only participant using Br. It is therefore not a common practice, but an individual one despite the high number of occurrences. In comparison, the fourth most occurrent closing is All the best, which is also an individual, or perhaps organisational, form used by two participants in an internal conversation. The informal closings appear to be slightly more individual than the informal greetings, but the formal closings are more frequent and more universal than the formal greetings. In the next section, the formality will be shortly discussed on individual, linguistic and conversational level.

4.1.1 The formality per individual, native language and dataset

Table 3 (see section 3.2) presents the participants along with how many formal versus informal greetings and closings they use in their emails. When comparing the individuals, there are three combinations of formality: informal in greetings and formal in closings (used by eight individuals); a mixture between formal/informal greetings and closings (used by eight individuals); and consistently informal in both greetings and closings (used by five individuals). None of the individuals are consistently formal.

The formality based on native languages was also analysed. Languages represented by only one individual cannot be analysed in an extensive matter here but will be discussed in section 5 in comparison to other studies. The languages that are shared by at least two participants are Swedish (four people), Spanish (three people), Swiss German and Arabic (both shared by two people). When comparing the formality by language, there is no obvious distinction between them. None of the individuals of the same L1 use both greetings and closings similarly. The language which shares most features is Spanish, as the participants tend to use informal greetings and formal closings. However, one of the individuals also uses informal closings.

When comparing the datasets, one clear pattern is that all participants in set 4 are exclusively informal, most likely due to the fact that this is the set of internal emails. What can be observed in set 1 is that the customers are quite more informal than the providers. However, the greetings are solely informal. The participants in set 2 conform to each other and foremost use informal greetings and formal closings. The fairly low formality level in both set 1 and 2 can be explained as the participants have been business associates for several years, which has either been indicated to the researcher by the Swedish contact or is indicated in some of the emails. Set 3 is most formal and interestingly the only set where formal greetings occur. The suggestions of these findings are discussed in section 5.
4.1.2 The use of smileys

From all collected data, a total of 13 smileys occur in three of the data sets. In set 1, all participants use smileys at least once each. The customers Annely and Benito use them two and three times respectively. Michael uses one smiley in a response to an email where Benito used a smiley, where the topic was non-work related. Monika inserts a smiley to Annely independently. In set 3, smileys are found three times, all made by the German participant Dieter (see example 4, Appendix B). Set 4 includes three smileys, two made by Linda in the same email and one made by Vitoria (see example 5, Appendix B). In general, the smileys are used as positive politeness strategies with the purpose to intensify positive statements or as rapport-building acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

4.2 Intensive analyses

In this section, the occurrences of greetings and closings are reviewed by the 66 emails that were selected for the intensive analyses, considering the data sets separately. The dataset categorisation has allowed for insights in order to discern whether the individuals accommodate each other and whether the purpose of the emails and the dependence of relationship influence the language. The findings are further discussed in section 5.

4.2.1 Set 1

Set 1 involves four people from two conversations: one between service provider Michael (Swedish) and the customer Benito (Spanish); one between Michael, his colleague Monika (Swedish) and their customer Annely (Swiss German). Considering that these are conversations between customer and service provider, they are rather informal. However, the participants in this set have had their business relationship for a long time and established a friendly relation. In addition, many emails contain short responses which can further explain the informality since the emails might be used instead of telephone calls in order to send quick questions, responses or small amount of information.

Benito is consistently informal as he either has no greeting or closing, or the informal greeting Hello+First name and a closing in form of a thank you and his first name. The emails without either of them are only quick responses or follow-up emails on his own previous email. Annely greets one recipient with Hi+First name and uses Dear all when writing to both Monika and Michael, thus becoming slightly more formal with several recipients. In quick responses, when thanking for or confirming the information sent previously, she omits the greeting (see example 1, Appendix B). In closings, she consistently uses the informal abbreviation of Best regards, namely Br, +Annely or A (her first name initial). Michael and Monika conform to each other with the informal greeting Hi (+First name) and the formal closing Kind regards.

4.2.2 Set 2

Set 2 includes nine emails from two conversations. Frederik (Danish), is involved in both conversations. The other participants’ L1s are Spanish, English and Finnish. The
individuals have a similar approach in their use of greetings and closings. They are all using informal greetings such as *Dear* or *Hi* and recipient’s first name which occurs in every greeting. However, Frederik omits the greeting in emails which are short responses with a *thanks*. These emails are all sent on the same day that the email he responds to was sent. When the day has passed, he greets the person before his response even though the response is mainly a *thank you*. What is also deviant about Frederik’s greetings is that he uses the Spanish word *Hola* instead of *Hi* when emailing Alisa, who is Spanish⁵ (see example 2, Appendix B). Alisa, however, responds with *Dear Frederik*. All individuals use formal closings in all emails, either *Kind regards* or *Best regards*, often with only their first name and sometimes the pre-set email signature. By using the first name only, they indicate a friendly relationship.

4.2.3 Set 3

This set of data includes seven conversations and ten individuals who are mainly using fairly similar language. The most evident similarities are the greetings, which usually consist of *Dear+First name*, and the formal closings. However, two conversations show some differences. One conversation between Yafar and Kazim (Arabs), Jessica (Swedish) and Alberto (Italian) shows variation along the conversation. The first email appears to be the very first contact between the two companies, where the Arabic company sends an enquiry about a collaboration. The email begins with *Dear Sir/Madam*, which is categorised as a formal greeting to an unknown individual. The following email is sent by Alberto who greets the person with *Dear Yafar Maalouf* (see example 3, Appendix B), thus being formal using first name and surname, which is responded similarly by Yafar. The following two emails are written by Alberto and Jessica, working for the same company, who are both greeting formally using the full name. Then, Yafar and Kazim send one email each using only the first name. Lastly Alberto uses the full name again in the final email. When the formality is lowered, the partnership is more or less established and following information about the deal is being transferred. However, Alberto is still being formal in his greeting, perhaps due to the relationship still being in the establishing phase. One reason could also be that it is Alberto’s first email to Kazim who has then entered the conversation. Interestingly, the single informal closing is performed by Kazim, who only writes one email, namely *Thanks & Regards*. However, it is preceded by *Thanks in advance for your kind reply*, thereby establishing rapport.

The second exception is the conversation between Alberto and Julia (Polish). The initial email is an enquiry from Julia about an expansion of their distribution area. It begins with the informal greeting *Dear Alberto* and ends with the formal closing *Best regards Julia*. Alberto accommodates and uses the same form of greeting and closing. In the following email by Julia, the formality decreases when she solely uses Alberto’s first name in the greeting and ends without a closing, which is somewhat followed by Alberto who greets with only the first name but still ends with a formal closing. That this conversation is informal from the start and becomes even more informal could be explained by the business relationship already being established further back and that it is performed in a short period of time, about two hours.

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⁵ This could be considered a positive politeness strategy to show that the interlocutors share common ground (see Brown & Levinson, 1987)
Overall, Jessica and Alberto, who both work for the manufacturing company, seem to accommodate the interlocutors by using similar levels of formality, which might demonstrate high proficiency levels in establishing and maintaining rapport with international business associates and using appropriate language in respect of purpose and cultural norms in BELF writing.

4.2.4 Set 4

As already discussed in the extensive analyses, this set includes only informal greetings and closings, most likely since it is internal communication and the individuals do not need to keep a professional or formal role for the sake of the company’s prosperity. This could also be the reason for why this set is the most personal and varied set. The individuals perform a more individual style. Vitoria (Portuguese) uses Hey as greeting together with first name. The closings vary between Best and Cheers (see example 5, Appendix B). The forms show a more friendly and informal tone than those reported in previous sets. Linda (Swedish) usually greets with Hi (+First name) or no greeting (in somewhat shorter responses). Her closings are foremost All the best (see example 6, Appendix B) but at one occasion she ends with merely her first name. Finally, Yorick (Dutch) varies, similarly to Linda, between Hi+First name or no greeting. His closings are usually solely his email signature, sometimes with addition of his first name.

5. Discussion

The level of formality in the datasets was quite low, which can be explained in some of the cases by the length of the business acquaintanceship. As seen in set 3, which includes one correspondence which is the first contact, the emails are more formal when rapport-building is necessary (see example 3, Appendix B). Furthermore, the accommodation to other people seemed to vary between individuals. Most participants did not have the ability or the commitment to conform their language to the cultural norms of the recipient. The purpose of the emails seemed to be the major factor that decided which language style was chosen, e.g. if they functioned as short responses greetings and closings were not necessary. Furthermore, the necessity of formal language for the prosperity of the business was not the same in all sets. In set 1, the customers were more informal than the providers, which could be explained by the providers being more dependent on the customers than vice versa, since the providers wish to maintain a good relationship in order to keep the other company as their client, while the customer could find another provider if needed. In contrast, the individuals in set 2, communication between airline and hotel chain or airline and online booking site, who are mutually dependent on each other were more correlative. Moreover, the emails indicated that they had cooperated formerly and already established rapport. Set 3 was the most formal set. The conversations occurred between manufacturer and seller, who are also dependent on each other, as in set 2. In addition, this set was the only one containing first contact between two companies, which further motivated the increased level of formality. Internal emails (set 4) were exclusively informal, probably due to the closer relationship between these individuals.
The above findings suggest that the standards of formality are lowered when there is no selling point or need to establish rapport. Furthermore, when initiating a new business contact or when the business associates are more dependent on each other, they accommodate the other individual or use more formal language.

The participants that were part of more than one conversation showed a variation in whether they alternated their language depending on the recipient. Frederik and Alberto both showed some variation, Frederik by using the Spanish recipients’ L1 in the greeting and Alberto by following the correspondents’ style. Alberto’s colleague Jessica also seemed to do this, which suggested that it could be a choice made by the company. The Swedish participants involved in two conversations did not show this variation but instead used their own personal styles.

An observation from the analyses is that there seems to be some common forms of greetings and closings used in intercultural lingua franca communication, despite L1 or culture. This suggests that there might be some distinguished normative expressions that are not culture-specific but instead regularly used in many cultures where English is not the L1. On the other hand, these findings might not be exclusive for lingua franca communication. Crystal (2006) found among his received emails that two-thirds of the emails contained a greeting and the three most common greetings were Dear David, David and Hi David (p. 106). This corresponds fairly well with the present study, which also found Dear and Hi to be the most common greeting words, usually followed by first name (see also Waldvogel, 2007). Approximately 11 per cent of the emails in the present study had no greeting, in contrast to Crystal’s (2006) one-third. On the other hand, these are all business emails whereas Crystal’s emails also contained personal correspondences.

As mentioned in section 4.1, Annely alone produced all the occurrences of the abbreviation Br. In addition, she often ended this closing with her first name initial. In closings, the use of the writer’s initials is an informal way of ending an email (Crystal, 2006, p. 108). The fact that the most frequent closing was produced by one individual affected the results. Nevertheless, the results were also discussed without this specific greeting, thus the impact was acknowledged and taken into consideration. When excluding the closing Br, the results suggested that informal closings were very individual, whereas formal closings were normative.

It might be a common perception that Dear is a formal greeting (e.g. Waldvogel, 2007, p. 138) regardless if using only first name or adding surname as well, as indicated by the many occurrences found in the data. It could therefore be argued whether the categorisations of formal or informal language can be generalised or if they should be altered depending on cultural norms. The commonality of using forms of Hello, such as Hi and Hey could be explained by them being direct translations of the form the participants are using in their L1⁴, which becomes informal in English. Crystal (2006) argues that the use of forms such as Hi confirms that emails generally are considered to be informal if the correspondents know each other. This could also be the case in many of the conversations analysed in the present study, as most conversations are not the first contact. Although the participants might not know each other on a personal level, they might have established a close business relationship.

⁴ In Swedish, for instance, the greeting word Hej is common both in business settings and in more informal contexts (Kankaanranta, 2006)
Crystal (2006) mentions that greetings are not always necessary in an email, for instance when the receiver is unknown to the writer, as can be the case by the first contact with a company, or when the receiver is a group of people, as when sending out information to an entire organisation or department. As Crystal (2006) further explains, a greeting can in the case of many receivers be *Dear all* or similarly, as was found in both set 1 (*Dear all*) and set 3 (*Dear Sir/Madam*). At one of the two companies studied by Waldvogel (2007), *Dear* was used nearly exclusively in emails sent to a group of people, only with one exception. Furthermore, in emails between acquaintances or friends, greetings can be left out when the email is considered a response to a previous email, except for when the response is delayed (Crystal, 2006, p. 105), which conforms to how Frederik used greetings. Based on the findings from the present study, it seems as if the more friendly the individuals are and the longer they have corresponded, the more informal they are and greetings and sometimes closings can be omitted. Moreover, the use of emails is sometimes similar to telephone calls or other verbal speech acts where quick responses are being sent without specific openings.

In Bjørge’s (2007) study, there were more informal than formal greetings in both groups studied (countries with high power distance (PD) relation and countries with low PD), which correlates to this study. However, there is an apparent inequality in how major the difference was, since the formal number of greetings reached a total of 42 per cent in Bjørge’s (2007) study whereas only 3.5 per cent of the greetings in this study were formal. In Bjørge’s (2007) study, there was a majority of formal closings, namely 68 per cent. In the present study the number was 39 per cent. It must however be mentioned that the contexts in these studies are different. Bjørge (2007) studied emails between students and professors which entail, foremost, two differences between the studies: the conversations are presumably shorter in Bjørge’s (2007) study, leading to more initial contacts; there is a more distinct power inequality between the interlocutors in the high PD group since professors have a higher rank and are treated respectfully by the students (Bjørge, 2007). Consequently, the formality increases. These findings suggest that email conversations might be less formal in business settings than in academia.

The native languages involved in the present study will be briefly compared to Bjørge’s (2007) findings, although the results cannot function as generalisations of a culture or nation. The results might however suggest people’s view on formality in different countries, which can be further studied in forthcoming research. When contrasting the participants in the present study to the participants in Bjørge’s (2007) study, categorised by L1, they correspond to some extent. In accordance with Bjørge’s (2007) findings, the Spanish and Swiss individuals were exclusively informal in greetings. In contrast however, these participants used formal closings in Bjørge’s (2007) study, which was not the case for all participants in the present study. Furthermore, Polish, Russian, German and Scandinavian residents were formal in Bjørge’s (2007) study, which corresponded to the findings in this study. Czech and Dutch participants were according to Bjørge’s (2007) study quite formal, which contrasts to the results in this study. On the other hand, the Dutch participant was part of internal communication and the Czech had only produced two emails which cannot provide enough information in this matter. In comparison, Bjørge (2007) had seven emails from two Czech participants. The British participants in both studies correlate quite well, being more formal in closings than in greetings. Arabic countries were formal according to Bjørge (2007), which partially correlated to this study. The conversation including Arabic participants was the most formal one and was initiated by an Arabic individual who set the standard in the
conversation. However, the only correspondents who departed from this standard were the Arabs. This could indicate that all participants in this conversation conformed to the other individuals’ cultures.

According to Kankaanranta (2006), NNSs seemingly use greetings and closings more frequently than NSs. Although it is not possible to confirm these findings in the present study, since there was only one NS, the findings suggested that NNSs did use greetings and closings quite frequently. Closings were used in almost all emails and greetings were only omitted in 24 emails, resulting in about 11 per cent, which is not particularly high, especially considering the short length of many emails.

Moreover, it seems to be a common understanding that Europeans are more formal than e.g. Americans (Crystal, 2006). In addition, a study on emails between Italian and British business associates showed that the British participants were more formal than were the Italians (Incelli, 2013). Interestingly, the Italian participant in the present study used most formal greetings, along with one of the Arabic participants. Without the ability to compare with other continents, the findings in the present study suggest that Europeans generally are not very formal in their writing, which perhaps could suggest that Europeans may have conformed to the American standard or that the means of email have had an impact on the formality. It might also be the case that it is not commonly known by NNSs exactly what is formal and what is informal in English business writing.

6. Conclusion

The findings in this study suggest that informal language is acceptable in business emails even though they are written across different nations and cultures. The study further suggests that written correspondence has become more informal by the medium of email, in comparison to e.g. business letters. Furthermore, most NNSs seem to use their own styles in writing instead of accommodating the interlocutor. The pace in which the formality decreases during the correspondence also seems fairly fast, although the data does not provide enough information in this matter to surely draw any conclusions.

The results in this study are not generalisations of how people from different nations write in business emails and how formal they are. They only provide suggestions on differences between nations and individuals and perhaps indications of which nations are more or less formal. Together with previous studies, and forthcoming, this study aimed to provide research with a broader perspective on cultural differences and suggestions on what should be reconsidered when educating English as a second or foreign language and business communication. Furthermore, when working in an intercultural business setting, one should keep in mind that the perception on appropriate language in business emails varies.

By continuing to study naturally-occuring business emails, research might eventually be able to determine common forms of email writing in business context. This way, some standards or guidelines for business emails, both in general and in BELF settings, can perhaps be established which can then be taught in higher education and in international organisations. If it were to be standardised, students would benefit from it.
being discussed in Business communication education. Moreover, it should be taught in
global companies which could help maintain good global relationships and strengthen
the knowledge and understanding of different cultures. Some focus should lie on
distinguishing what is formal language and which cultures are more or less formal.
Furthermore, it should be discussed when formal/informal language is appropriate in
emails. However, it might be of importance to separate standards of formality and
standards of a certain email language, as emails show variations in the language, thus
making it difficult to determine a certain type of writing (Bou-Franch, 2011, p. 1783).

7. Acknowledgments

The author of this paper would like to thank the four people who provided the data and
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used for the study. All participants are, of course, rewarded with a thank you. Last but
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the valuable comments and feedback on the paper and furthermore for the tips on
(B)ELF research.
References


Appendix A

My name is Lena Pettersson and I am writing a Bachelor’s degree project at Stockholm University, at the Department of English. The topic in the study is Business English as a Lingua Franca, which means using English in the workplace between people who do not have English as their first language. More specifically, I am investigating emails written in English between two non-native speakers of English. The aim of this study is to investigate strategies used by non-native speakers, in order to achieve effective communication in written discourse. I am also interested in finding out whether there are any recurrent reasons for misunderstandings.

Should you need more information, do not hesitate to get in touch with me at pettersson_lena@hotmail.com, or my supervisor Dr Beyza Björkman at beyza.bjorkman@english.su.se.

Informed consent note

I have been informed by Lena Pettersson of the overall aims of the research project on using business English as a lingua franca (BELF) in the workplace. I understand that the data (emails) will be used interpretively in publications and other research outlets by the researcher or any other researcher with whom she might need to collaborate in the future. The data will be anonymised so that no part of it can be traced to any individual or the company. I have been guaranteed complete confidentiality and anonymity by the researcher, and I have been given the right to see any paper prior to its publication. I have also been given the right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Signature Date

……………………………………………………………  ……………………………………………………………

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Appendix B

Examples of emails

External emails

1
Everything ok. I got her confirmation.
Thanks and br, Annely

2
Hola Alisa
Thank you very much
We will update it.
Have a great day
Best regards
Frederik

3
Dear Yafar Maalouf
Thank you for your enquiry.
Currently we do not have any representative in your territory, therefore we are interested in exploring this opportunity with your Company.
Prior proceeding, we would like to have more information about the products of interest and if you are familiar with the technology used.

Best regards
Alberto Giannini

4
Dear Kenneth / Alberto,
it was a pleasure meeting you yesterday - I am looking forward to working together :-) 
Please find my contact details below. We will contact you soon with the first results of our market researches.

Best regards,
Dieter xxx

Internal emails

5
Hey Linda,
This is great! Hooray to swedish people! =)

Salesforce does work very well and it's quite complete as a crm. We're now just doing some cleaning and organising our info in there to make a better use of it. So then we're going to be able to take any kind of report from Salesforce.

I received an email from xxx (your database developer) and forwarded it (this morning) to xxx (FR director in Brazil) to reply to him. She can help better than me.

If you want to contact her to know more about it in details, here is her email: xxx@xxx.br

Cheers,

Vitoria xxx
Assistente de Marketing Direto / Direct Marketing Assistent

Hi Yorick
Hope everything is well.

I really enjoyed skillshare earlier this year, and it was nice meeting you. I was wondering about the group that some of us applied to if we wanted to be more involved in helping other sections with facetoface. Is there any plans for that group?

Will you be involved in next years skillshare and a facetoface stream?

All the best Linda

Linda xxx
Project Manager Face2Face