

The Role of Social Distance and Social Status in Shaping Politeness in English Digital Communication: Evidence from Uzbek- International Academic Email Exchanges

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ABSTRACT

Academic email is a socially sensitive form of digital communication in which linguistic choices are shaped by the relationship between writer and recipient. This study examines how social distance and institutional status influence politeness in English-language email exchanges involving Uzbek EFL writers and foreign professors, university offices, scholarship administrators, and related institutional recipients. The empirical material derives from a larger archive of more than 70 authentic email exchanges; after deduplication and corpus cleaning, 24 Uzbek-authored English emails written by eight anonymised writers between 2023 and 2026 were selected for quantitative analysis, including 23 requestive messages. Using a mixed qualitative-quantitative pragmatic analysis informed by Brown and Levinson's variables of social distance, relative power, and imposition, the study coded request directness, mitigation, openings, gratitude, closings, and recurrent genre moves. Conventionally indirect requests accounted for 95.7% of requestive emails, while gratitude, modal “would,” and “kindly” were especially frequent. Qualitative analysis of recipient replies showed a contrasting tendency toward briefer and more task-oriented responses. The findings indicate that unequal institutional status strongly encourages deference in upward communication, while repeated interaction may reduce social distance without removing status asymmetry.

Keywords: Social distance, social status, academic email, politeness strategies, EFL pragmatics

INTRODUCTION

Email remains a central channel of academic and institutional communication despite the growth of instant messaging platforms. In higher education, requests for supervision, acceptance letters, document corrections, scholarship information, procedural clarification, and reconsideration are frequently made through email. These messages are not purely transactional. They simultaneously construct a relationship between writer and recipient, and their perceived appropriateness depends on the writer's ability to calibrate directness, deference, formality, and interpersonal warmth to the social situation. Research on student-faculty email therefore treats pragmatic competence as a central component of successful academic communication [2].

Politeness theory provides a useful starting point for explaining this relational dimension. Brown and Levinson argue that the weight of a face-threatening act is affected by three sociological variables: social distance between speaker and hearer, relative power, and the ranking of imposition in the relevant culture [1: 74]. In academic email, these variables are especially visible because many interactions are institutionally asymmetrical. A student, doctoral researcher, or scholarship applicant often writes upward to a professor, administrator, or decision-maker who possesses greater authority over access, documents, deadlines, or opportunities. Under such conditions, a request may threaten the recipient's negative face by imposing on time or decision-making autonomy, while the writer may also risk their own positive face if the request is refused.

Social distance and social status are analytically distinct. Social distance concerns familiarity, solidarity, and relational closeness; social status concerns institutional power, authority, or role-based entitlement. Two scholars of equal rank who have never met may communicate with high social distance but relatively equal status. Conversely, a doctoral student and a

supervisor may become personally familiar while retaining a clear institutional asymmetry. This distinction is important because digital communication can reduce distance through repeated contact while leaving the underlying hierarchy intact. The present study uses authentic email exchanges to examine this dynamic rather than assuming that formality automatically disappears as a thread progresses.

Previous research has shown that academic email is particularly demanding for second-language users. Biesenbach-Lucas found systematic differences in how native and non-native graduate students formulate requests to faculty, demonstrating that e-politeness involves both request strategy and the surrounding discourse [2]. Economidou-Kogetsidis likewise showed that directness, forms of address, supportive moves, and lexical mitigation can affect whether non-native student emails are perceived as status-congruent [3]. Later work emphasized that email writers must manage both transactional goals and interactional relationships, especially when the degree of imposition changes [4]. These findings make academic email an important site for examining the interaction of sociolinguistic variables and pragmatic competence.

The present study focuses on Uzbek EFL users communicating in English with foreign professors and international institutional recipients. Its purpose is to identify how social distance and social status are reflected in request formulation and in the wider organization of academic emails. The study asks three questions: 1) Which politeness devices recur most frequently in the Uzbek-authored emails? 2) How does institutional asymmetry shape request directness and the structure of upward communication? 3) How do foreign professors and institutional recipients respond within the same exchange, and what does this reveal about the relationship between status, distance, and communicative entitlement?

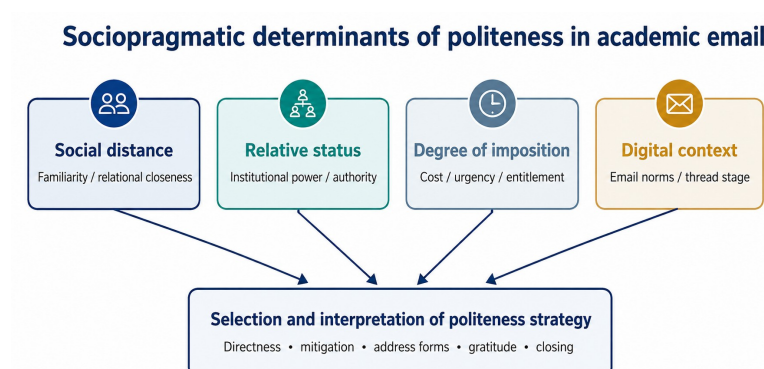


Figure 1. *Sociopragmatic determinants of politeness in academic email*

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employs a corpus-informed mixed qualitative-quantitative design. The broader dissertation working archive contains more than 70 authentic email exchanges involving Uzbek applicants or researchers and foreign professors, university offices, scholarship administrators, embassies, and related institutional actors. Because this raw archive contains forwards, quoted messages, recipient replies, repeated thread material, and messages serving different analytical purposes, it was not treated as a single homogeneous quantitative corpus. Instead, the present article distinguishes clearly between the broader archive and a cleaned analytical subcorpus.

The quantitative subcorpus contains 24 authentic English-language emails written by eight anonymised Uzbek EFL writers between 2023 and 2026. The subcorpus contains 2,685 running words, with a mean message length of 111.9 words and a median of 108.5 words. One message was primarily a document-submission note and was excluded from request-directness coding, leaving 23 requestive emails. The foreign professors' and institutional recipients' replies were retained for qualitative paired-turn analysis but were not treated as an equal-size statistical comparison group. This distinction prevents overstatement of group-level differences.

Request directness was coded with reference to established request taxonomies used in interlanguage pragmatics and academic email research [3; 4]. Messages were classified according to the pragmatic force of the request head act, with attention to conventionally indirect forms such as modal query-preparatory requests, more direct forms such as imperatives or explicit performatives, and non-conventionally indirect hints. The analysis also recorded recurrent lexical and discourse-level politeness devices, including modal “would,” “please,” “kindly,” “I would like...,” gratitude, well-being openings, anticipatory closings such as “I look forward...,” and offers to provide additional information.

The qualitative stage examined email organization and relational work across the broader archive. Particular attention was paid to openings, titles and forms of address, self-identification, affiliation, request head acts, rationale, attachment references, mitigation, gratitude, apologies, and closings. The analysis further compared upward requests with authentic replies from professors and institutional staff, focusing on differences in linguistic burden, task orientation, and role-based entitlement.

All personal names, private email addresses, application numbers, and other identifying information were removed or replaced by analytical codes. Short excerpts are reproduced only when necessary to illustrate a pragmatic pattern and are anonymised. Because the present coding was conducted by a single researcher, intercoder reliability has not yet been established; a second-coder reliability check on a representative subset is recommended before submission to journals that require formal reliability statistics.

Table 1. *Structure of the empirical email dataset and analytical functions*

Corpus component	Size	Analytical role
Broader authentic archive	70+ email exchanges	Qualitative thread and recipient-response analysis
Clean Uzbek-authored subcorpus	24 emails; 8 writers; 2,685 words	Quantitative frequency analysis
Requestive subset	23 emails	Directness coding
Foreign recipient replies	Not treated as equal-size group	Qualitative comparison of institutional response style

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Directness and mitigation in Uzbek-authored upward requests

The strongest quantitative result is the overwhelming preference for conventionally indirect request strategies. Of the 23 requestive emails, 22 (95.7%) were coded as conventionally indirect, one (4.3%) as primarily direct, and none as primarily non-conventionally indirect. This pattern suggests that the Uzbek writers consistently oriented to the institutional asymmetry of the interaction. Rather than issuing unmitigated directives, they typically framed requests through modal constructions, permission-oriented wording, or deferential formulations that left the recipient room to accept, refuse, or modify the requested action. Such a pattern is compatible with Brown and Levinson's prediction that greater relative power and higher imposition increase the motivation for redressive action [1: 74].

The lexical data reinforce this interpretation. Thank-you expressions occurred in 22 of 24 emails (91.7%), modal 'would' in 17 (70.8%), and 'kindly' in 16 (66.7%). Well-being openings appeared in 11 messages (45.8%), 'please' in 10 (41.7%), 'I would like...' in 9 (37.5%), 'I look forward...' in 9 (37.5%), and explicit offers to provide further information in 5 (20.8%). These devices often co-occurred, producing what may be described as dense politeness packaging: the request itself was softened, but the message also contained relational work before and after the head act. This is significant because some previous L2 email research has reported pragmatic problems associated with excessive directness, omitted greetings, or insufficient downgraders [3]. The Uzbek subcorpus displays a different risk profile: the dominant tendency is not under-mitigation but potentially formulaic over-mitigation.

Table 2. Recurrent politeness devices in the 24-email Uzbek-authored subcorpus

Politeness feature	Frequency	Percentage
Thank-you expressions	22	91.7%
Modal 'would'	17	70.8%
'kindly'	16	66.7%

Well-being openings	11	45.8%
'please'	10	41.7%
'I would like...'	9	37.5%
'I look forward...'	9	37.5%
Offer of further information	5	20.8%

Communicative purposes and genre-move organization

The 24 emails were distributed across several recurring communicative purposes. Initial requests for acceptance or invitation accounted for 7 messages (29.2%), follow-up, reminder, or status-check messages for another 7 (29.2%), clarification or procedural inquiries for 4 (16.7%), appeals, reconsideration, or negotiation for 4 (16.7%), and document-submission messages with a request-supportive function for 2 (8.3%). These purposes differ in the degree of imposition they place on recipients. A routine status inquiry normally requires less institutional intervention than a scholarship appeal or a request for correction of an official document. The corpus suggests that writers expanded mitigation and supportive explanation when the stakes were higher, especially when asking a recipient to revise, reconsider, or accelerate an institutional process.

Across these functions, a recurrent genre-move sequence emerged: formal greeting or title, self-identification, institutional affiliation or contextualisation, request head act, rationale or attachment reference, mitigation, gratitude, and formal closing. This sequence was not obligatory in every email, but it was sufficiently recurrent to characterize the preferred rhetorical organization of upward academic communication in the subcorpus. The pattern indicates that politeness is distributed across the entire message rather than confined to a single marker such as 'please'. In this respect, the findings support the view that email politeness must be analyzed at discourse level, including openings, supportive moves, and closings [2; 4].

Dominant genre-move sequence in the Uzbek-authored email subcorpus



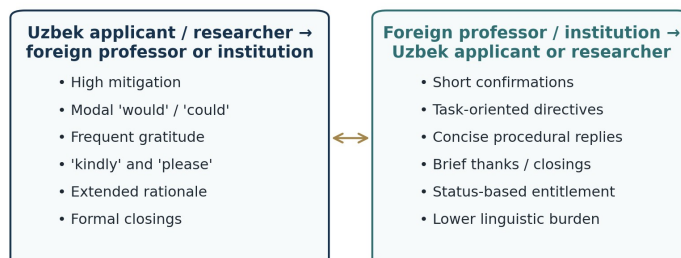
Moves are recurrent rather than obligatory; individual messages may omit or reorder elements.

Figure 2. *Dominant genre-move sequence in the Uzbek-authored email subcorpus*

Social status, social distance, and recipient responses

Qualitative paired-turn analysis reveals a clear asymmetry between upward requests and the replies of foreign professors or institutional staff. The Uzbek-authored messages often carried a high linguistic burden: they introduced the writer, explained the institutional context, justified the request, used multiple mitigators, expressed gratitude, and closed formally. Recipient replies, by contrast, were frequently shorter and more task-oriented, for example by confirming that a document had been sent, requesting a missing item, attaching a file, or briefly acknowledging receipt. This contrast should not be interpreted as evidence that foreign recipients were less polite. It reflects different role-based rights and obligations. The applicant must persuade or request; the professor or administrator is institutionally entitled to confirm, instruct, approve, or decline.

This relationship can be described as status asymmetry in linguistic workload. The lower-status writer typically performs more explicit deference because the requested action depends on the higher-status recipient's cooperation or authority. Foreign recipients can often respond efficiently without equivalent mitigation because the response itself fulfils an institutional duty. Academic email research similarly emphasizes that status-congruent communication requires writers to recognize the relational consequences of requests and forms of address [4; 5]. The present data extend that insight by showing how the burden of politeness may be unevenly distributed across the two sides of the same email thread.

Qualitative asymmetry in upward requests and institutional replies

Interpretive contrast only; the foreign-recipient replies were not coded as an equal-size quantitative comparison group.

Figure 3. *Qualitative asymmetry between Uzbek Upward requests and foreign institutional replies*

Distance contraction with status persistence

Repeated email exchange often reduced social distance. First-contact messages tended to contain fuller self-identification, institutional affiliation, formal titles, and more elaborate explanation. Once a thread was established, later turns could become shorter because participants shared contextual knowledge and no longer needed to reconstruct the entire situation. However, reduced distance did not necessarily eliminate status inequality. A researcher who had already exchanged several messages with a professor could adopt a warmer or more concise style while still using deference for consequential requests. This pattern may be termed distance contraction with status persistence: familiarity increases through interaction, but role-based power remains active whenever a decision, correction, recommendation, or institutional action is requested.

The importance of imposition becomes especially visible in emotionally charged or high-stakes messages. In the corpus, directness increased mainly in scholarship appeals, urgent document-correction requests, or reconsideration contexts. Such cases do not overturn the general preference for indirectness; instead, they show that pragmatic strategy is dynamic. When urgency or personal consequence rises sharply, writers may tolerate greater directness, intensification, or emotional language despite continuing to recognize the recipient's higher status. This

supports a multidimensional account in which social distance, power, and imposition interact rather than operate independently.

Table 3. *Relationship between social distance, status, imposition, and email realization*

Relational configuration	Typical linguistic pattern	Interpretation	Corpus relevance
High distance + unequal status	Formal title, self-identification, modal request, rationale, gratitude	Strong deference and low entitlement	Common in first-contact acceptance/invitation requests
Lower distance + unequal status	Shorter opening, shared context, continued mitigation for consequential requests	Distance contracts while hierarchy remains	Common in follow-up threads with familiar professors/offices
High imposition + unequal status	Expanded explanation, apology/gratitude, intensified mitigation; occasional emotional escalation	Imposition increases linguistic work	Seen in appeals, corrections, reconsideration
Institutional recipient reply	Concise confirmation, instruction, attachment notice, brief thanks	Role-based entitlement permits task-oriented brevity	Observed qualitatively in foreign replies

Pedagogical implications

The findings have direct implications for EFL instruction. Learners should not be taught that politeness is equivalent to adding 'please' or converting an imperative into a modal question. Effective email writing requires sociopragmatic judgement: the writer must evaluate who the recipient is, how well the participants know each other, how much institutional authority the recipient has, and how burdensome the requested action is. Economidou-Kogetsidis argues for explicit instruction in email politeness because status-congruent email writing requires pragmatic awareness beyond grammatical competence [5]. The Uzbek data support this pedagogical need but also suggest that

instruction should address both under-politeness and over-politeness.

For Uzbek EFL writers in particular, classroom materials could use authentic anonymised email threads to compare efficient politeness with formulaic over-elaboration. Learners can be asked to revise the same request for different recipients – a close peer, an unfamiliar colleague, a familiar supervisor, and a senior professor – and then explain how social distance, status, and imposition change their linguistic choices. Such activities would promote digital pragmatic competence and help writers balance deference with clarity and concision.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that social distance and social status remain central determinants of politeness in English academic email communication. The analysis of authentic Uzbek-international correspondence shows a strong orientation toward deference in upward communication: 95.7% of requestive emails used conventionally indirect strategies, and gratitude, modal 'would', and 'kindly' were highly recurrent. Politeness was not limited to the request head act but was distributed across message openings, contextualisation, rationale, mitigation, gratitude, and closings.

The paired-turn analysis further shows that institutional asymmetry affects not only linguistic form but also the amount of interpersonal work performed by each participant. Uzbek applicants and researchers typically carried a heavier linguistic burden when requesting action from professors or institutional gatekeepers, whereas recipient replies were often shorter and task-oriented. This asymmetry is best explained by role-based entitlement rather than by a simple polite/impolite distinction.

A further contribution is the distinction between social distance and social status. Repeated interaction may reduce distance and lead to shorter, warmer messages, but institutional hierarchy can persist. When the degree of imposition rises again – for example in scholarship appeals, reconsideration, or official document correction – mitigation and supportive explanation

tend to expand. The findings therefore support a dynamic model in which distance, status, imposition, and digital context jointly shape politeness strategy.

Practically, EFL instruction should include explicit training in academic email pragmatics, with emphasis on status-congruent requests, efficient mitigation, appropriate openings and closings, and the avoidance of both excessive directness and excessive formulaic deference. The principal limitation of the present study is the small, non-balanced quantitative subcorpus and the absence of intercoder reliability statistics. Future research should expand the corpus, code foreign-recipient replies systematically as a comparison group, include second-coder reliability, and test whether the observed patterns remain stable across institutional contexts and stages of relationship development.

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