Sara Orthaber
University of Maribor, Slovenia

'THANK YOU IN ADVANCE': SLOVENIAN REQUEST EMAILS AND RESPONSES

Abstract

Communication through email represents one of the most important forms of business communication, not just within a company but also externally with customers. The paper examines email interactions between the agents representing a Slovenian transport company and its customers. More specifically, the study examines specific aspects and elements of email production in a Slovenian customer service setting. It is hoped that the findings will help enhance the communication skills of learners of Slovenian as a foreign language and students of translation and increase their cultural awareness and their knowledge of technology-mediated customer service communication. Moreover, the findings could increase students' understanding of the pragmatic motivations behind interactants' linguistic choices.

Keywords: email communication, CMC, institutional interaction, Slovenian language

1. Introduction

Communication through email represents one of the most important forms of business communication, not just within a company but also externally with customers and other stakeholders. Surveys have found that when it comes to simple transactions such as requesting and providing information, 80 percent of customers prefer to contact customer service representatives via email (e.g. Bennett, 2013). This makes email communication an interesting object of study by linguists. Given their proliferation and pervasive use it is not surprising that emails have been extensively studied across languages and institutional settings. Compared to the number of studies of email communication undertaken in the academic setting, however, fewer studies have been conducted in authentic business or customer settings, presumably due to the difficulty of obtaining (potentially sensitive) data from companies (e.g. Lenassi, 2015) and due to ethical considerations, such as email surveillance and privacy concerns that not only refer to employees but also to customers and clients.

Previous studies of email communication have mainly focused on individual sequences of one-way emails rather than the entire exchange (but see Gimenez, 2006; Haugh, 2010). Most widely examined were email openings and closings (e.g. Bou-Franch, 2011; Waldvogel, 2007), specific linguistic aspects of email communication such as register (e.g. Lenassi, 2015), particular speech acts such as requests (e.g. Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Ho, 2010) or more broader requesting events (Merrison et al., 2012; Skovholt, 2015). In a similar vein, languages other than English have not received comparable attention. Thus, the aim of the study is to narrow this research gap and examine language specific aspects and elements of email production in a Slovenian customer setting (openings, requests/responses, closings), i.e. in a language that to date has not received much attention. It is hoped that the findings will enhance communication skills of learners of Slovenian as a foreign language as well as of students of translation, and will help increase their cultural awareness and gain an insight into technology-mediated customer service communication. In addition, the findings could increase students' understanding of the pragmatic motivations behind interactants' linguistic choices.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a literature review on email communication and outlines the relevant characteristics of email. In Section 3, the data and methodology are described. This is followed by the analysis (Section 4), where the main results are presented and discussed. Finally, Section 5 offers some data-driven conclusions and discusses implications of the findings for learners of Slovenian as a foreign business language and students of translation.

2. Literature review

New forms of technology-mediated communication are increasingly being deployed in customer service, enabling customers to easily and quickly gain the simple information they require without having to visit the company personally for front desk service assistance. Although the telephone is frequently the customers' first choice, the affordances (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001; Herring, 2010) of email, often play an important role in choosing one

medium over another. Flexibility (emails can be sent at any time), affordability (sending emails is cheaper than calling given that making a call often comes with an additional charge) and simplicity (information may be sent via email attachment, it can be printed, archived and forwarded), were identified as important factors in guiding customers' preferences (e.g. Lan, 2000; Gimenez, 2006).

Earlier theories of computer-mediated communication (CMC, henceforth) have largely treated CMC as impoverished interaction, claiming participants cannot express themselves as effectively as in face-to-face communication. They argued that the absence of visual, paralinguistic and prosodic cues results in impersonal communication, increasing "psychological distance" (Rutter, 1987). Given that CMC is sensitive to technological and social constraints (Herring, 2007; Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2013), users have developed various creative orthographic strategies to compensate for the absence of such cues otherwise available in telephone or face-to-face communication. Therefore, through distinctive features such as capitalisation (for emphasis conveying excitement, for warning, or undesirable shouting conveying agitation), use of (excessive) punctuation, highlighting words or sentences in bold for emphasis, and so on, users simulate spoken language and construct the paralinguistic and prosodic dimensions of communication (Werry, 1996). However, just as there are specific guidelines that pertain to professional telephone communication regarding vocal quality such as rate, pitch and volume, there are shared conventions for text-based CMC, which in an online world are typically referred to as netiquette. In this respect, the use of capital letters, for instance, is traditionally internet shorthand for shouting and may be viewed as provocative and aggressive (Extejt, 1998; Danet, 2013; but see Darics, 2015: 253-255) and potentially open to evaluations of impoliteness.

Although it supports, and increasingly also assumes, very rapid exchanges, email is seen as an asynchronous communication form because the addressee cannot monitor nor intervene in the turn while it is produced. On the other hand, asynchronicity affords the message producer to carefully plan, review and revise the message before sending it in terms of the content, grammar and layout. Using the affordance of plannability is not only said to maintain a professional image, but may potentially also result in more polite messages (e.g. Duthler, 2006; Waldvogel, 2007). Like in text messaging (e.g. Spagnolli & Gamberini, 2007), in emails each message represents a turn. This is a unitary contribution to the exchange from one participant, whereas an exchange consists of two or more turns. By sending an email, the message producer selects the next interactant. In this setting, it is the customer who initiates the exchange by sending a request email to the contact centre, making the agent's turn reciprocation relevant. In other words, customers initiate an action sequence, putting the agents in the position to complete it. Through several turns, emails can build the form and style of a dialogue. Although emails normally do not require an immediate response, in customer service response time plays an important role for customer satisfaction. While over 40 percent of customers expected a company to reply to their email within six hours in 2008 ("Customer service takes on greater importance", 2009), in 2014, they expected this to happen in just four hours (Toister, 2014). A further characteristic of emails is that they are not spatially limited with the number of characters as is, for instance, a text message, a Tweet or a Facebook post, although there are limits on per-message attachments and the overall message size. In line with email etiquette, however, business emails should be in the form of a few short unambiguous paragraphs (e.g. Lenassi, 2015). For this reason, email

users, for reasons of economy or in line with the normative practices described in books on professional email communication, typically resort to the affordance of the medium by sending additional information (written documents, pictures, videos) as attachments.

The language used in business emails has also been analysed extensively (e.g., for example, Baron, 2000, 2002, 2003; Crystal, 2007; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000, 2005, 2006, 2009). Most authors have identified the participants' tendency to reproduce an informal oral style through their use of various spoken discourse elements and less carefully edited messages at the expense of efficiency needs that prevail in the business world. Although customer service interactions are seen as a form of institutional interaction, emails from customer service settings have not received comparable attention. In previous studies, emails were segmented into three sequences: opening, main body and closing (e.g. Baron 1998; Crystal, 2007; Bou-Franch, 2011; Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2013). Literature on communicative practices in emails has emphasised the optional nature of opening sequences (e.g. Baron, 1998; Crystal, 2007) . While some studies of emails in institutional settings have found that greetings and address terms were amongst the most salient structural features of emails (e.g. Bou-Franch, 2011; Chejnová, 2014; Chen, 2006), others have reported their absence (e.g. Waldvogel, 2007). In addition, differences in frequency in greetings (and self-identification) and use of signatures (e.g. Sherblom, 1988) were found to depend on whether an email was sent up or down the institutional hierarchy, with frequency being higher when emails are sent up the hierarchy (e.g. Sherblom, 1988; Bou-Franch, 2011). However, Waldvogel (2007), who examined email greetings and closings from two workplaces in New Zealand, a manufacturing plant and an educational institution, identified differences between both settings. While greetings and closings were pervasively used in the manufacturing plant, they were much less salient in the educational institution. She argues that while such behaviour could be the result of a workplace culture, it could also result from the fact that the exchanges in the educational setting were regular and thus lacking greetings and closings. Similarly, Bou-Franch (2011) examined openings and closings in a Peninsular Spanish educational setting. Contrary to Waldvolgel's (2007) results, her data showed that not only were opening and closing mechanisms pervasively used in email communication, but that not all email communication is homogeneous, e.g. informal and generally lacking openings and closings. Similarly, in a study of UK business email messages carried out by Gimenez (2006) a great variation was observed in the ways message recipients were addressed, from no greeting to the more formal or conservative greeting (e.g. Dear Sir). Gimenez (2006) further found that with multiple addressees, producers of embedded emails addressed the active participants in their initial salutation or closing, but not also the witnesses (the ones placed in the CC field). A more recent study by Lenassi (2015) also identified a high salience and great variation regarding the use both informal and formal greetings. She further found that while salutations may be the first indicators of the message register, users will not only adhere to the formality of writing for professional purposes, but will also strive to create the involvement expected in close relationships. The findings of the studies discussed so far indicate that apart from the culture and the setting, the relationship between participants coupled with their professional status play an important role when analysing email interactions.

Similarly to email openings, email closings were also reported to be optional (e.g. Baron, 1998; Crystal, 2007; Herring, 1996). That said, despite their non-canonical nature, their use was found to be pervasive (Pérez Sabater et al., 2008). Salience of closings was observed

in a study by Bou-Franch (2011), where closings were used in 97% of all emails. Depending on activity type, the author also identified other closing mechanisms such as apologies, pre-closings, self-identifications, signatures and postscripts. Bou-Franch (2011) argues that by using opening and closing sequences, the participants frame their contribution like in synchronous interactions, "as if acknowledging the temporal 'interruptions' derived from the asynchronous nature of the interaction" (Bou-Franch, 2011: 1775). Further influencing the salience of these sequences is the participants' orientation to the relevant institutional roles and institutionally relevant tasks and activities.

Apart from variations in the use of openings and closings, differences were observed in the way requests were performed in email communication, whereby greater investment was observed in power-asymmetrical work relationships (Márquez Reiter, 2009). Ho (2010), for instance, examined requests in email exchanges between leaders and subordinates and found that despite their intrinsic power position the leaders made the effort to construct a desirable identity of a considerate and polite leader by strategically incorporating face-saving elements to convince email recipients to comply with the requested act more easily (e.g. the use of possessive pronouns, indirect requests). Similarly, Skovholt (2015) looked at one leader's communication style with a group of internal and external co-workers. When writing to team members, the leader used various face-saving strategies to minimise the imposition when making requests and for maintaining a personal relationship with her employees such as the use of conventional indirectness, metaphors as narrative devices, address terms, provision of encouraging feedback to the group, and even the use of emoticons. When communicating with external co-workers, on the other hand, the leader's request strategies were grounded in her institutional role or the superordinate's wish, yet were also more direct, particularly when dealing with conflict (requests performed as interrogatives, evoking hierarchical roles by referring to one's own as well as to superordinates position as a leader, rejecting requests without mitigation). It is said that these differences result from the leader's different perceptions of entitlement to making the requests to a particular team. Language practices in business emails were also studied by Lenassi (2015) who found that participants formulated messages that were either semi-formal containing traits of spoken language or formal with features typically found in traditional letters (business correspondence phrases and patterns). She not only found that the passive voice was used frequently to follow the economy principle, but that when dealing with complex and potentially delicate topics, the participants used specific macrostructural elements that help them carry out verbalisation successfully (e.g. complex passive constructions and nominalisations). This further supports the claims that interactional input and manifestations of politeness may vary according to job position or status in an organisation (subordinate vs. superior). In other words, the participants' motivation to use politeness depends on several factors that arise from a cultural and situational context. The present analysis of request emails and responses focuses on the phenomena reported in previous studies (e.g. salience of email openings and closings, use of face-oriented devices in email middles), confirming some findings and providing evidence to question others.

3. Data and methodology

The findings of this study form part of a larger research project (see, for example, Orthaber & Márquez Reiter, 2011, 2015, 2016)[1] that examines customer service interaction in a Slovenian public transport company (Company, henceforth). The Company from which the data were taken provides national and international train services and offers customers different channels to contact them, of which telephone and email are most widely used for requesting information. As such it is a commercial organisation, for which managing and fulfilling service requests forms the main purpose and goal of interaction (Merritt, 1976) because it represents the basic resource through which a company can achieve commercial returns. The customers are also likely to treat this in much the same way, which is why rather than imposition, requesting is perceived as beneficial to the Company (e.g. Lee, 2011).

In 2009, the Company generously provided a corpus of emails along with a formal consent to use these data. Originally, the dataset comprised 88 customer-initiated request emails and 87 responses. For the purpose of this study, however, 20 email exchanges were not included in the analysis of requests and responses because they were either in English language (seven email exchanges), were treated as complaints or were Company internal exchanges (one customer email was forwarded to the relevant Company department). Therefore, of 175 authentic emails written by native speakers of Slovenian, 135 were considered for the analysis of requests and responses. Nonetheless, when looking at the frequency of opening and closing practices, all emails (apart from the ones written in English language) were considered, that is 80 customer-initiated request emails and 81 responses sent by the agents, respectively.[2]

All texts represent external communication with customers who inquire about information related to travelling by train. The Company provided emails in their original form, which means that they contain documentary parts (e.g. the sender, the subject, time of sending and signature cards) which provide rich contextualisation cues. For this purpose, the text in the emails has not been altered to correct errors in the original and was translated to convey the style, register and the feel of the source language text thus preserving the spelling and grammatical errors found in the original Slovenian emails (e.g. Example 1, line 02). However, due to the scope of the paper, not all contextualisation cues could be considered. The focus is thus on the selected elements identified in email openings, the body message and email closings. In the emails, participants' names have been changed and certain personal details blurred to preserve anonymity.

As the paper focuses on the interactions between customers and a service provider, accounting for the context in which it takes place is of key importance. In doing so, the notion of 'activity type' (e.g. Levinson, [1979] 1992) can prove useful (e.g. Culpeper, 2011). Levinson (1992: 69) views activity type as "a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-oriented, socially constituted, bounded events with constraints on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions. Paradigm examples include teaching, a job interview, a jural interrogation, a football game, a task in a workshop, a dinner party, and so on." Service encounters are thus a type of activity for they consist of conversational

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1   This article is developed from the author's PhD thesis.

2   One customer-initiated email was missing from the dataset.

contributions (e.g. requests). As such they represent formal settings that typically comprise greater social distance between interactants (e.g. formal greetings/leave-takings) and specific sequences of events (some more ritualised than others). In this sense, activity types put constraints on the setting in terms of what the participants' allowable contributions are and how they are likely to be taken, that is, what inferences may be drawn as a result.

The collected emails provided by the Company show diversity, particularly in terms of length, response time and number of exchanges. Most incoming request emails (86%) were resolved instantly. This may have resulted from the fact that the customers provided the agent with enough details for the request to be dealt with satisfactorily in just one thread comprising a single customer-initiated email, the so-called "chain initiator" and the agent's reply, the "chain terminator" (Gimenez, 2006). In other cases, additional information was needed for the request to be carried out successfully. With regard to email length, the majority of customer-initiated request emails (69%) was quite short, containing between nine and 50 words. The longest request email contained 238 words. This illustrates the customers' orientation to the type of interaction as task-oriented. More variation was observed with regard to agents' response time. According to the Company (Uršič, personal communication, 31st March 2011), agents are to reply to request emails immediately or in the case of more complex itineraries within one day. In my data, their response time ranged from two minutes to three days. That said, the agents responded within the 4-hour framework in 76% of all emails from the corpus. However, in an email, urgency can be indicated by, for instance, setting the level of importance as 'high' in email delivery options to alert the addressee that the message needs immediate attention. The importance level is then displayed in the recipient's inbox with a visual indicator, e.g. a red flag. That response time is important could be seen from the fact that some customers set the level of importance as 'high' in their emails, indicating urgency. This move was observed in eight incoming emails. Customers also managed their expectations regarding response time metalinguistically, sometimes in combination with the high-importance level, using pre-closing and closing formulae such as *prosim, da bi mi odgovorili čim prej. Najlepša hvala* ("if you could please respond as soon as possible. Thank you very much"), *za prijazno in ažurno pomoč se vam iskreno zahvaljujem* ("I would like to express my sincere gratitude for your kind and timely assistance"), or *v pričakovanju odgovora se Vam zahvaljujem* ("in expecting your response I'd like to thank You"). In rare cases the customers capitalised the pronouns that refer to the agent (e.g. Vi, Vam). This practice is typically employed in formal letters rather than in emails when text producers explicitly wish to display a high level of respect for the addressee (Snoj, 2013).

Next, I will look at the practices the participants, i.e. the customers and the agents, employ in the email openings, before focusing on selected phenomena identified in email middles. Finally, the participants' closings practices are outlined.

4. Results

4.1 Openings

Customer services such as sales or support typically use a role email address, i.e. address that is associated with a function rather than a person (e.g. info@... or companyxy@...). Such email addresses are likely to influence customer's level of formality given that the addressee is an unknown company representative (e.g. greetings, use of third person pronouns). It could be argued that the relationship between the customers and the Company representatives is an asymmetric one given that the agent's job is to turn them into paying customers by assisting them.

In task-oriented exchanges such as the ones examined here the interactants' identity is irrelevant to the task at hand and the participants do not know each other. It is therefore not surprising that the opening sequence contains greetings only. In Slovenian, the most common greeting in written formal settings is *spoštovani* (third person plural). As a general greeting it means "to whom it may concern", but when used together with the address form *gospod/gospa* ("Sir/Madam") it means "dear Sir or Madam". If *spoštovani* is followed by a full name or a surname, it functions as "Dear Mr/Ms".[3] This impersonal salutation that displays a high degree of social distance between participants was used in 39% of incoming request emails (e.g. Example 6, line 02). With 44%, the most widely used greeting was *pozdravljeni* (third person plural), which means "hello". This salutation displays familiarity rather than distance and is frequently used in slightly less formal oral communication. The same goes for other variations of *pozdravljeni*, which were used in 6% of emails, such as *lepo pozdravljeni* (see Example 1, line 02) or *lep pozdrav* ("hello") or *dobro jutro/dober dan* ("good morning/good afternoon"), which is more typical of face-to-face and telephone communication. Overall, *spoštovani* and *pozdravljeni* followed by a punctuation mark (comma or exclamation mark) were the most frequently used forms of greeting in emails between unacquainted parties (i.e. 83%). In nine instances, the customers did not provide a greeting. However, in three cases this occurred in non-initial emails, e.g. when further specifying the request.[4] This suggests that the customers oriented to social closeness as already established in the prior email(s).

When responding to customers, on the other hand, the agents always provided a salutation *spoštovani* ("to whom it may concern") in initial position, suggesting that this is the standardised corporate form used to maintain a professional relationship with the customers and likely part of the customer service culture. The use of this impersonal greeting not only reflects the absence of a (previously) established relationship between the Company and the customer, but also a preference for a more transactional rather than personalised relationship with the customers, even though in the vast amount of cases, a customer's name can be inferred from the incoming email. However, in five embedded emails one agent displayed closeness with an increment to the greeting *spoštovani* by including the customer's first name. This further indicates that the greeting *spoštovani* is the established corporate form when addressing customers.

3   The general rule is that the greeting *spoštovani* followed by an exclamation mark rather than a comma is to be used in formal letters (SAZU, 2001), however, in Fidaplus, the Corpus of Slovenian Language the comma is used more frequently.

4   Given that the dataset includes few non-initial emails, opening and closing sequences were not grouped separately to look for any differences between initial and non-initial emails.

In the setting explored, email openings consist of a greeting only. Their pervasive use on the part of both parties (over 90%) suggests that in this setting greetings are part of the expected formality and serve as politeness markers. The fact that lack of greetings was found in a few embedded messages means that the participants oriented to social closeness as already established in previous emails. Overall, the customers' use of greetings shows greater variation and their choice is likely to accommodate to the contact centre's role email address. At the same time, the customers' choice of greetings reflects the reasonable degree of formality of relationship that is being established (Márquez Reiter, 2011). The agents' choice of greetings, on the other hand, is much more homogenous, displaying a preference for the maintenance of distance and respect, reflecting a high level of formality (e.g. Examples 2-5, 7). The findings regarding the frequency of greetings are in line with those of Bou-Franch (2011), who found that in certain situated email practices the message producers' use of greetings is pervasive. Moreover, the results of this study also support her findings that greetings are diverse rather than homogenous and that they indicate the level of formality in interaction.

4.2 Requests and responses

In the interactions examined in this paper emphasis is on requesting information from a Company (i.e. demand) and providing requested information (i.e. supply) via email. Such exchanges are typically short and unlikely to include any interpersonal topics. The following examples illustrate the customers' and the agents' communicative practices in email interactions.

Example 1

Following the greeting (line 02), the customer produces a request for train information and specifies it with exact dates, departure times and routes (cf. lines 06-08).

	Slovenian	English
01	**Subject:** Potovanje v Torino Email text:	**Subject:** Journey to Torino Email text:
02	Spošotvani,	Helloe,
03	Prosim za vašo ponudbo in možnosti plačila:	Please send me have information about your[PLURAL]
04	Podjetje XY	offer and payment methods for: company XY
05	Potnik Gal Petek	Passenger Gal Petek
06	15/10: 8:08 odhod za Torino, prihod ob 19:43	15/10: 8:08 departure for Torino, arrival at 19:43
07	17/10: 19:39 odhod iz Torina preko Villacha (spalnik),	17/10: 19:39 departure from Torino via Villach
08	prihod v Ljubljano 08:10 v soboto, 18/10	(sleeper), arrival to Ljubljana 08:10 on Sunday, 18/10
09	Hvala v naprej in lep pozdrav,	Thanks in advance and kind regards,
10	Gal Petek	Gal Petek
11	T:019876543	T:019876543
12	GSM: 030345678	MOB: 030345678

Given the asynchronous quality of email, the participants cannot co-construct the request as over the telephone, which is why the customers need to supply enough elements in their initial email for the agents to be able to comply with their request by, for instance, providing information regarding departure and destination points, duration of stay, preference for a direct train, sleeper or specific route, type of ticket and so on. That is, the customers need to have some knowledge of what they want when inquiring via email. However, the more specific the request, the less manoeuvre space the agent has to develop the request in a "grantable direction" (e.g. Lee, 2011: 122). Despite high entitlement and low contingencies associated with making the request (cf. Curl & Drew, 2008; see also Ho, 2010; Skovholt, 2015), the customer uses the otherwise optional politeness marker *please*[5] and the plural pronoun *vaš* ("your"). Given that the email producer committed few orthographic and grammatical errors (e.g. line 02), the email seems carefully planned. In many other request emails (not presented here) elements typical of CMC were observed, particularly trailing dots (Baron, 2000), abbreviations (line 11: T for the telephone number) or acronyms (e.g. LJ for Ljubljana, MUN for Munich). The use of such elements makes the message slightly less formal.

In their emails, the customers displayed a high degree of entitlement when requesting information and used formulations such as "I want to know about X" or "may I (please) have information…" (see Example 6). Although such interactional behaviour has been observed in many institutional settings (e.g. Lindström, 2005; Heinemann, 2006; Curl & Drew, 2008; Raevaara, 2011), it makes this setting different from, for instance, email requests in academic environments (e.g. Ho, 2010; Merrison et al., 2012; Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2013), where relationship asymmetries are typically greater, that is, students (email senders) are interactionally less powerful than lecturers (email receivers). Nonetheless, to mitigate the imposition of the request the customers also employed face-oriented strategies such as accounts and apologies, and devices such as *please*. Similar behaviour was observed on the part of the agents, when requests could not be fulfilled or in cases where interactional trouble occurred. Not being able to grant the customer's request is potentially face-threatening (Goffman, 1967). In such cases, the agents employed various face-saving devices including attitude stance adverbials, the passive voice and collective self-reference forms.

Example 2

	Slovenian	English
01	**Subject: RE:** Potovanje v Torino Email text:	**Subject: RE:** Journey to Torino **Email text:**
02	Spoštovani!	To whom it may concern!
03	Na žalost spalnika v Sloveniji ni mogoče kupiti.	Unfortunately, a sleeper cannot be booked in Slovenia.
04	Cena ki vam je bila posredovana velja za sedež.	The fare that was sent to you is the standard fare.
05	Lep pozdrav!	Kind regards!
06	Agent 3	Agent 3
07	Digitalni podpis agenta	Email Signature Card

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5   In the corpus, the politeness marker "please" was used 32 times in the corpus (in 26 request emails).

Following the customer's request email presented above, a female agent sent a response (not included here), in which she informed the customer about the different payment methods and the fare for a second class return ticket for the desired route. Shortly after that, the customer sent another email requesting the fare for the sleeper, which the agent did not include in her reply. At line 03, the agent prefaces the dispreferred response with an attitudinal adverb *žal* ("unfortunately") to tone down the lack of service availability. The lack of availability may also be seen as an account (Antaki, 1994) as to why this element of the customer's request was not addressed in the initial response. Using the passive voice, the agent explicates what the fare sent in the previous email includes. Previous research on business correspondence has emphasised that text producers often use more complex sentence structures when a service the customers have specified cannot be supplied and that one of the reasons for this is the face-threatening nature of such actions (e.g. Lenassi, 2015). By using more complex constructions, the agents can distance themselves (and potentially also the customer) from the act (Bosch Abarca & Giménez Moreno, 2006) and thus mitigate the impact of the rejection for not being able to grant the request. By the same token, the passive voice allows the agent to deflect responsibility for not having supplied this piece of information in the initial response by remaining unnamed or hovering in the background, thus protecting her professional face. Put differently, the use of the passive voice may be viewed as a distance strategy, with which the agent tries to protect her professional face (e.g. Márquez Reiter, 2008; Creelman, 2015).

The example below further demonstrates that the agents used face-oriented strategies when having to reject (a part of) the request, i.e. 'no direct trains'. This is accomplished by using an institutional 'we' form (exclusive of customer). In the data, the agents either used the collective self-reference 'we' (pošiljam**o** vam/we are sending you) or the individual self-reference "I" (pošiljam vam/I am sending you). However, as can be seen from the sentences that follow (e.g. I recommend, I am attaching) the agent changes footing (Goffman, 1981) through a pronoun shift, that is, he undertakes a change from a collective self-reference form (speaking as the representative of an organisation) to an individual self-reference form (speaking as an individual person) (e.g. Lerner & Kitzinger, 2007).

Example 3

	Slovenian	English
01	**Subject:** RE: Bruselj Email text:	**Subject:** RE: Brussels Email text:
02	Spoštovani,	To whom it may concern,
03	Za Belgijo nimamo direktnega vlaka. Glede cene pa	We[PL] do not have a direct train to Belgium. As for the
04	vam priporočam nakup vozovnice interrail s katero	fare I recommend purchasing an interrail pass which
05	se lahko vozite 5 dni, v roku 10 dnih. Cena je 159.00€	you can use 5 days within 10days. The fare is 159.00€
06	(če ste mlajši od 26 let), te50% popust na vozovnico	(if you're under 26 years of age) you ha50% discount
07	do meje, ki znaša cca.10€, ter plačilo obveznih	on the ticket to the border which is cca. 10€, and
08	rezervacij, glede na vozni red.	payment of obligatory reservation fees, depending on
09		the timetable.
10	Prlilagam tudi eno povezavo:	I am also attattaching one connection:
11	[skopiran vozni red v angleškem jeziku]	[copy-pasted timetable in English language]
[...]	[...]	[...]
28	Lep pozdrav,	Kind regards,
29	Agent 5	Agent 5
30	Informator	Agent's signature card (company address, tel. and
31	Digitalni podpis agenta	fax numbers)

This change in footing can be seen as a way in which the agent deals with a dispreferred response regarding lack of service availability for direct trains in that it allows him to attenuate individual responsibility. Further noteworthy is the fact that the agent's text contains several grammatical and orthographic errors (e.g. line 05, *10dnih [10 dni];* line 06, *te50% [imate 50%]*; line 09, *prililagam [prilagam]*), use of lower-case spelling for proper nouns (e.g. interrail), lack of conventional punctuation (commas, spaces between brackets). These features signal evidence of an unedited text. The agent also copy-pastes the timetable into the main body of email (lines 10-27, omitted), which results in the loss of formatting, making the reading difficult and erratic. This may not be entirely in line with business email etiquette, where accurate grammar, syntax, spelling and layout are high on the etiquette scale for reasons of professional image management, thus suggesting that the agents respond to emails in haste, potentially due to the high volume of customers' incoming emails and pressures to process queries as quickly as possible (e.g. Crystal, 2007; Gimenez, 2006).

Example 4 is a response to a customer's request (not included here) for a timetable and a fare for a journey from Ljubljana, Slovenia, to Honfleur, France.

Example 4

	Slovenian	English
01	**Subject: RE:** Vprašanje Email text:	**Subject: RE:** Question **Email text:**
02	Spoštovani!	To whom it may concern!
03	Žal železniška postaja v Franciji z imenom	Unfortunately, a train station in France
04	Honfleur ne obstaja.	named Honfleur does not exist.
05	Lep pozdrav!	Kind regards,
06	Agent 4	Agent 4
07	Digitalni podpis agenta	Email Signature Card

Here, the agent indicates that a dispreferred response is forthcoming as evidenced from his use of the stance marker "unfortunately". The marker not only serves to express the agent's attitude to the proposition, but also works as a means to diminish the weight of the upcoming utterance followed by the justification that follows.[6] The latter is disguised in the form of a negation (e.g. the station "does not exist"), which may serve as a facework strategy following the customer's potential failure to provide valid information (i.e. the train station named Honfleur does not exist according to the Company's computer programme; cf. Example 3, line 03: "We do not have a direct train to Belgium"). By stating the fact, the agent uses the negative structure informatively as well as supportively in that he creates a distancing effect from the issue. In other words, with this structure the agent avoids implying that the customer is at fault for having provided the 'wrong' name of the station because of which the request cannot be complied with.

Examples 2 to 4 illustrate that the use structures such as the passive voice, negative constructions or collective self-reference forms are situation-specific and particularly useful when manoeuvring through potentially face-threatening situations. Further, other-initiated repairs also potentially face-threatening (e.g. Example 5).

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6   In the literature, such distancing mechanisms that mitigate potential face-threats are labelled as negative politeness strategy (e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1987; see also Bosch Abarca & Giménez Moreno, 2006).

Example 5

	Slovenian	English
01	Spoštovani!	To whom it may concern!
02	Za izdelavo voznega reda in cenika rabim točno	To produce a timetable and provide the fare I need
03	mesto v katero želite potovati!	the exact city to which you wish to travel!
04	Lep pozdrav,	Kind regards,
05	Agent 3	Agent 3
06	Digitalni podpis agenta	Email Signature Card
[...]		

In the initial email (not included here), the customer inquired about an international rail journey, but provided a name of a country, which was too vague. Therefore, before it can be fulfilled, the request needs to be further specified, that is, the agent (lines 02-03) needs to initiate repair by addressing the trouble source. Research on other-initiated repair in online interaction is scarce, but it has been suggested that the participants "adapt the basic repair mechanisms which are available in ordinary conversation to the technical specificities" (Schönfeldt & Golato, 2003: 272) of the medium. Contrary to requests made by telephone, where the call agents typically hold directorship to constitute what customers want through specification sequences, the agent here provides an account as to why additional information is needed (e.g. lines 02-03). In other words, repair may be seen as a resource for the request to be developed into a grantable one. It is noteworthy that the agent uses an exclamation mark in her response (line 03). Apart from excitement, the use of exclamation marks in business email communication, particularly in customer settings, signals the message producer's attitude towards the addressee and may have negative implications for the ongoing relationship when used inappropriately. As such it should only be used sparingly such as when something needs to be emphasised, as in this case is the missing information needed for the request to be completed (see Verasai, 2015).

The following customer-initiated email is characterised by features typical of CMC in that it resembles a short text message (e.g. the absence of otherwise salient email openings, use of all lower-case letters and truncated syntax).

Example 6

	Slovenian	English
01	**Subject:** prosim informacijo	**Subject:** may I please ask for information
	Email text:	**Email text:**
02	povezava munchen-ljubljana in obratno, spalnik,	route munchen-ljubljana and back, sleeper,
03	cena?	fare?
04	pozdrav,	regards,
	tone basle	tone basle

Nonetheless, the request comprises key elements needed for the transaction to be carried out. This suggests that the customer not only maximises information density through syntactic reduction (line 02), but displays high entitlement through a direct, transactional communicative style. Despite minimal facework invested into this request (e.g. the marker "please" at line 01 and the leave-taking greeting at line 03), the agent, in line with her role, is obligated to fulfil the request (e.g. Example 7).

Example 7

	Slovenian	English
01	Spoštovani!	To whom it may concern!
02	REDNA CENA POVRATNE VOZOVNICE JE 263.20€;	STANDARD RETURN TICKET COSTS 263.20€;
03	DOPLAČILO ZA SPALNIK NA RELACIJI MUENCHEN-	ADDITIONAL PAYMENT FOR A SLEEPER WITH TWO
04	LJUBLJANA IN NAZAJ V DVO POSTELJANI KABINI	BEDS FOR RETURN TRIP MUNICH-LJUBLJANA IS
05	PA 90,00€.	90,00€.
06	ODHOD	DEPARTURE
07	*[skopiran vozni red]*	*[copy-pasted timetable]*
08	POVRATEK	ARRIVAL
09	*[skopiran vozni red]*	*[copy-pasted timetable]*
10	Lep pozdrav,	Kind regards,
11	Agent 3	Agent 3
12	Digitalni podpis agenta	Email signature card

What stands out in the agent's reply is the difference in the use of lower case letters used in the opening and closing versus all upper case letters used in the main body of email.[7] As discussed in Section 2, all block capitals may have negative implications for the interaction (e.g. Werry, 1996; see also Extejt, 1998; Switzer, 2008). This is one of the limitations of CMC

7   The fact that lower case is used in the email opening and closing suggests that as a standardised form they are automatically generated when the agents press the reply button. This further explains the fact that the customers are never addressed by their names.

in that due to the affordances of email interlocutors do not have access to paralinguistic messages such as tone of voice, intonation or other social cues and therefore do not have access to non-verbal information about how others are responding (Rice, 1992; Herring, 1999). However, given that there is just one such example in the data it is impossible to demonstrate empirically or make claims as to why the agent used all upper-case letters in this response and whether it was intentional. Rather, it may provide support to the claim that agents work in high-pressure environments and thus respond to emails in haste.

As the examples have illustrated, the agents employed facework when carrying out dispreferred turns such as inability to grant the request or when initiating/providing repair. In such cases the agents prefaced their response using stance markers to soften the force of the rejection or provided accounts. They further used the passive voice and negative constructions, which allowed them to focus on the facts rather than on themselves or the customers and thus minimise their involvement in or responsibility for their actions. To this end, such grammatical constructions need to be studied from various perspectives and contexts and used as teaching materials.

4.3 Closings

In the closing sequence, the participants work to achieve a termination of the social event (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). In the data, customers' closings were pervasive and more elaborate compared to the openings. Most customers' closing sequences comprised an expression of gratitude (60 instances or 75%), leave-taking (69 instances or slightly over 86%) and/or the customer's signature (74 instances or 93%). The customers provided at least one of the three closing elements, with just three customers proffering only one closing element. There was also one instance of expressing good wishes and of an anticipatory apology[8], but these were the less representative closing elements. The salience of signatures could be linked to the resemblance the email carries to the traditional letter, in which signatures are ubiquitous.

In the closing, the customer thanks the agent in advance (line 09). The first closing element, i.e. minimal functional discourse unit, identified was appreciation, which featured different variations such as "thank you" or the phrase "thank you (very much) in advance"; "thanks for your reply (in advance)" (e.g. Example 1, line 09). The latter two elements, typical of asynchronous communication, are prospective, which means that upon receiving a satisfactory response from the agent, the transaction is treated as complete and the customer, if satisfied with the reply, is unlikely to send a separate thank-you reply. This element, which in the data occurred in 33 (out of 80) instances, can be viewed as an appeal to the agent in that they allude to future correspondence (Herring, 1996: 85). By thanking the agent in advance the customer displays high entitlement to have the request granted even before the agent has agreed to comply with the request. At the same time, with this closing phrase the customers may orient to the agents' workload in that they shortcut the interaction and at the same time adhere to the expectation of showing appreciation for the granting of the request.

Leave-takings were also frequently proffered. In most cases (69 out of 80 request emails), the customers produced the greeting *lep pozdrav* ("kind regards") or the abbreviated version *lp*

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8   When the customer apologises in advance for imposing on the agent with his or her request. However, an apology, in this case, can be understood as appreciation with an apologetic undertone (cf. Coulmas, 1981).

(22%), i.e. initials of the greeting (e.g. "rgds"), both typical of email communication. In just two cases, the customers used the formal greeting *s spoštovanjem* ("respectfully yours").

Regarding their frequency of occurrence, the findings of this study differ from those reported by Waldvogel (2007), where the occurrence of closing sequences in the educational organisation she examined was 34% and in the manufacturing plant only 10%. Given that the closing elements display variations, the findings provide support to the claims by Androutsopoulos (2006) and Bou-Franch (2011) that the language of emails is not homogenous, informal or oral-like and generally lacking closings. In this respect, the customers' pervasive use of closings may provide evidence that in Slovenian email communication this is standard business practice when terminating an encounter. The vast majority of customers (93%) also provided some form of identification in the final position of the closing sequence even though identity is irrelevant in this setting. This finding differs from those reported in one of the earlier studies of signature use in emails carried out by Sherblom (1988). The pervasive use of signatures in the emails examined could be also attributed to participants' orientation to their relationship as formal and preferred as together with the opening it wraps up the entire communicative event.

The agents' closing elements differ from those of the customers, in that they are homogenous as each outgoing email includes the greeting *lep pozdrav* ("kind regards") in its full form, followed by the agent's personal email signature card that comprises the agent's full name, job position and company address. Also, likely to be included in the signature card is the leave-taking greeting "kind regards", which is consistently used in all outgoing emails. Studies of emails from a managerial perspective argue that when responding to customer emails, personalisation plays an important role in customer satisfaction. In this sense, Strauss and Hill (2001) argue that customer satisfaction increases not only when agents address emails adequately and respond to them promptly, but also that they proffer their name in the closing sequence. This finding has implications for students of Slovenian as a business language who may not be aware of the link between personalisation of emails and customer satisfaction. The salient recurrence of such closings in agents' emails highlights the institutional nature of the setting and reflects the Company's preferred customer service culture, which rather than familiarity is oriented towards maintaining social distance.

5. Concluding discussion

The aim of this article was to illustrate how customers and agents go about requesting and providing information. In this section, I will briefly discuss how the findings could help raise learners' (particularly students of Slovenian as a foreign business language as well as students of translation) awareness of the function some of the key email features may have in business communication. It is hoped that the findings will not only contribute to learners' understanding of communicative practices used in business emails, particularly differences in language and style between incoming (i.e. customer-initiated) and outgoing emails (agents' responses), but also raise their awareness of the motivations behind the participants' linguistic choices (e.g. the passive voice, negative constructions, changes in footing).

First, the high salience of email openings and closings in the corpus indicates that despite the power imbalance between them, at least theoretically speaking, the participants still orient towards each other's face needs. Differences in language and style were nevertheless observed in the use of greetings which dictated the social distance (the slightly less formal greeting *pozdravljeni* on the part of the customers versus the formal, impersonal greeting *spoštovani* on the part of the agents). By paying attention to the type of greetings the participants use in emails, students of Slovenian as a business language could learn to interpret the nature of email communication, the relationship between interactants and gain an insight into the workplace culture. This is also important for students of translation who often face challenges in finding equivalent expressions that reflect the level of social distance indicated in the source language. Second, the way the agents dealt with more delicate activities such as rejecting the request or initiating and providing repair when interactional trouble occurred has profound implications for learners, showing that specific linguistic knowledge is indispensable in the business world, particularly in customer-focused environments. The overall findings coupled with the examples presented in this study could be used to face students of Slovenian as a foreign language with the circumstances in which more complex linguistic forms and phrases are used (e.g. complex passive constructions, negative constructions, use of corporate plural forms) to help them boost their linguistic competence. For students of translation such knowledge may be just as important given that translating potentially face-threatening acts calls for focused knowledge of redressing strategies available in the source and target language(s). Finally, it is hoped that the findings will help increase teachers' awareness of the advantages the use of these findings could have for the students.

Acknowledgements

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