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## **On Non-Native Speaker E-mail Communication from a Genre Perspective**

**Abstract:** The author has investigated a corpus of informal e-mail messages produced by upper-intermediate Czech learners of English. The method of analysis draws upon Biber and Conrad (2009) employing primarily a qualitative analysis as part of the author's dissertation. First of all, the paper touches upon such descriptive terms as style, register, and genre. Secondly, the paper presents the results of an analysis of genre features including deviations. In the concluding part, the article outlines implications for practice.

**Keywords:** genre; register; style; second-language writer

### **Introduction**

One of the challenges for non-native speakers represents the task of learning appropriate style, register, and genre. This could be attributed to a lack of language intuition (e.g., Crystal & Davy, 1969). Working on the assumption that the issues of style, register, and genre tend to be a stumbling block for non-native speakers of English, the author has investigated a corpus of informal e-mail messages. The e-mails were produced by upper-intermediate Czech learners of English. First, the paper touches upon such descriptive terms as style, register, genre, and deviation. Second, the paper outlines the method of analysis and delves into the situational characteristics. Third, it presents the results of an analysis of genre features (genre markers) and discusses their deviations. The method of analysis draws in part upon Biber and Conrad (2009) and employs primarily a qualitative analysis. The preliminary results from the selected genre markers under investigation do not corroborate the assumption that most second language writers of English should have substantial difficulty in applying the appropriate genre markers.

However, it is important to underscore that every text is situation-bound as well as situation-determined.

To reiterate, the present study aimed at conducting a genre marker analysis. The author has investigated a mini-corpus of informal e-mail messages produced by Czech learners of English. It presents the results of an analysis of genre features (genre markers) and their deviations, employing a qualitative analysis. To this end, the author has investigated a corpus of fifty-seven informal written scripts (e-mails), with a total of 10,383 words. The e-mails were written by Czech learners of English in answer to one of the Cambridge exam rubrics with the aim of finding out whether second-language writers of English have considerable difficulty in applying appropriate genre conventions.

It should be mentioned at the outset that the corpus gathered for the present study bore certain drawbacks. Only 57 e-mails were under investigation in a circumscribed context. This could affect the nature of any interaction. The mini-corpus is clearly biased towards an exam writing setting. Generalization is not the purpose of this study; rather, the aim is detailed genre marker analysis of the e-mail messages written by non-native speakers of English.

## The Theoretical Framework

**Note on register, genre, style, and deviation.** The study of stylistics is of great importance and relevance for language learners. Yet it is a complex task. The complexity can be well-illustrated by looking at the key concepts of stylistics such as register, style, and other closely related concepts, for example, genre. Although there is at present a fairly extensive body of literature on the three descriptive terms, there is still little agreement on the concepts (cf. Biber & Conrad, 2009; Enkvist et al., 1964; Fowler, 1996; Urbanová, 2005).

In reviewing the literature and textbooks in sociolinguistics and stylistics the concept of *register* generally appears to fall into two main groups. Holmes (2001, p. 246) holds that the term register can be understood in two ways. In a narrower sense, the term is applied to refer to the specific vocabulary employed by various occupational groups as exemplified below. Or it is used in a broader sense and associated with such situational parameters as addressee, setting, mode of communication, task or topic. For some scholars (e.g., Romaine, 1994) the term register is confined to the specialized language of like-minded people. In other words, it only refers to occupational varieties. Similarly, Wardhaugh (2002, p. 51) refers to registers as “sets of language items associated with discrete occupational and social groups.” In a similar vein, register is then understood as a speech variety used by special groups of

people, for example lawyers or tennis players, distinguished by a number of distinctive features such as grammatical structures (e.g., impersonal constructions in legal English) and vocabulary (e.g., love, van) in tennis terminology. It must be stressed, however, that these definitions are difficult to accept because the concept of register is strongly tied up with situations of use rather than a specific professional or social group. Other authors, therefore, (e.g., Halliday, 1978) stress the language variation and selection in a specific social situation and context with specific functions of language in those contexts. Examples include: legal register, scientific register, medical register, etc. According to Bhatia (2009, p. 389) register refers to a functional use of language to suit a particular configuration of contextual factors of mode, field, and tenor of discourse, while style refers to an individual's use of language. Lee (2001, p. 11) points out that Crystal and Davy (1969) tend to use the term style in the same way most other people use register—that is, to refer to particular ways of using language in particular contexts.

In examining discourse, another theoretical concept is worthy of consideration. It is the notion of *genre*. The concept of genre is nonetheless highly problematic. For Lee (2001, p. 37), the two terms (register and genre) are the most confusing and are often used interchangeably, especially due to the fact that they overlap to some extent. Swales (1990, p. 4), for instance, states that "...the relationship between genre and the longer established concept of register is not always clear." In recent years, genre analysis has enjoyed immense popularity and attracted the attention of a large number of scholars engaged in various fields (see e.g., Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Swales, 1990; 2004), who have been prompted by various motivations for the research. In particular, the last decade has witnessed increasing attention to the notion of genre and its application in language teaching and learning. The interest was driven by a dual purpose to understand the relationship between language and its contexts of education (Hyland, 2002, p. 113). The term genre has been defined in a variety of ways in the field of linguistics and much interesting research has been done on genres in more specialized varieties. According to McCarthy (2001, p. 112) "most linguists working in the area accept the notion of genre as norm-governed social activity that manifests linguistic and non-linguistic behavior to varying degrees of institutionalizations."

For Hyon (1996) and others, for example Hyland (2002), genre theorists and practitioners fall into three chief camps. They do not need to be seen as being mutually exclusive but complementary to each other. First is the Sydney School, based on the systemic functional work of Halliday, which has developed research and well-established pedagogies. It focuses on primary, secondary, and adult education (see e.g., Hyon, 1996); second, the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) camp represented by Swales (1990). It particularly focuses on non-native speakers of English in tertiary education. Finally, The New Rhetoric

(NR) group, especially North Americans, for whom genre knowledge has been considered to be primarily social, embedded in the community and context of writer and audience (Hyon, 1996, pp. 693–722). As the name of this group suggests, it is composed of rhetoricians and composition theorists who have been very well trained in rhetorical theory and composition studies. The NR group draws primarily from L1 perspective and makes no reference to second or foreign language studies. The research of the NR centers on investigating the ideological, social, and physical surroundings in which genres are produced. It also focuses on studying the ways in which genres evolve, are negotiated, and fall out of favor. Consequently, the NR rhetoricians claim that texts used in classroom study are not authentic any more when they are taken out the original contexts and purposes.

In agreement with Lewandowski (2010, p. 69), perhaps the most convincing explanation of the three descriptive terms (register, style, and genre) was offered by Biber and Conrad (2009). The authors make the point that style, genre, and register refer to three different angles or perspectives on text varieties. That is, the same text can be analyzed from all three perspectives. The perspectives vary in terms of: (a) the text for analysis; (b) the linguistic analysis for the text; (c) the distribution of these characteristics within the text; (d) the interpretation of the linguistic differences. More specifically, the *register perspective* is made up of a combination of an analysis of linguistic characteristics, that is, typical lexical and grammatical characteristics. The analysis centers on lexical-grammatical characteristics that are always functional and which are common in a text variety with analysis of the situation of the use of the variety. Biber and Conrad (2009, p. 2) explain that “the underlying assumption of the register perspective is that core linguistic features, for example, pronouns, verbs, are functional. In effect, particular features are commonly used in association with the communicative purposes and situational context of texts.” Whilst a register is a set of linguistic variations that are context-dependent, *genre perspective*, by contrast, encompasses the description of the purposes as well as the situational context of a text variety. Its linguistic analysis concentrates on the conventional structures used to construct a complete text within a text variety, such as the ways informal e-mails tend to start or end. The same is true of the layout or physical organization on the page. Genre features are not usually pervasive. Rather, they are conventional and occur once in a text. In this connection, the two authors speak of *genre markers*. Genre markers are clear signals of the type of text and “the distinct expressions and devices that are used to structure a text from a particular genre” (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 54). Some genres (spoken or written) tend to be highly structured. These are, for example, religious speeches and formal business letters. In fact, they frequently contain fixed formulaic genre markers which occur in a fixed order. As mentioned above, written conventions are, as a rule, readily identifiable at the beginning and end

of texts. By contrast, other kinds of texts are less rigidly structure in this respect. To mention one example, informal e-mail messages and informal letters can show greater variation in the use of conventions. Moreover, because the purposes and other contextual factors of the two may be closely related, they may contain the same genre markers. Finally, in terms of *style perspective*, its linguistic focus is not functionally motivated by the situational context. Rather, style features reflect aesthetic preferences that are associated with particular authors (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 2). The features of style are not necessarily functional. However, they are preferred due to their aesthetic value.

To reiterate, according to Biber and Conrad (2009) the same text can be analyzed from register, genre, and style perspectives as shown and summarized in Table 1 with regard to the text, linguistic characteristics, distribution of linguistic characteristics and the interpretation of linguistic differences.

Table 1

*Defining characteristics of register, genres, and style*

Defining characteristics	Register	Genre	Style
Textual focus	Sample of text excerpts	Complete text	Sample of text excerpts
Linguistic characteristics	Any lexico-grammatical features	Specialist expressions, rhetorical, organization, formatting	Any lexico-grammatical features
Distribution of linguistic characteristics	Frequent and pervasive in texts from the variety	Usually once-occurring in the text, in a particular place in the text	Frequent and pervasive in texts from the variety
Interpretation	Features serve important communicative functions	Features are conventionally associated with the genre: the expected format, but often not functional	Features are not directly functional: they are aesthetically valued

Source: Biber and Conrad (2009, p. 16).

Furthermore, *style* can be defined as a choice of linguistic means: as *deviation* from a norm perspective, as recurrence of linguistic forms, and as comparison. Generally, deviation is a “noticeable difference from what is expected, especially from expected standards of behavior” (Tárnyiková, 2002, p. 116). Consequently, deviation is sometimes associated with irregularity. If irregularity is creative and unexpected, then it may be referred to as deviation. This is particularly true of literary stylistics where deviation is associated with the studies of a writer’s individual style. In linguistics, it can be understood as linguistic usage which departs from normal expectations of the language. That is, deviation does not need to be ungrammatical or contrary to any rules. Seen from this perspective, deviation is not viewed as binary oppositions—deviant vs. non-deviant—but rather in terms of “scales/clines ranging from non-deviant to deviant language

manifestations” as suggested by Tárnayiková (2002, p. 118). The concept of deviation is equally relevant for the ESL/EFL domains. This is because it brings up the notion of idiolect and uniqueness of individual utterances of second language learners and the choices they make.

**Methods of analysis.** The current study has employed a quantitative approach and the e-mail analysis, as mentioned above, builds primarily on the comprehensive framework suggested by Biber and Conrad (2009). However, I have decided to modify the framework to a certain extent. More specifically, Biber and Conrad (2009, p. 47) advocate a register analysis which is dependent upon three steps.

1. A description of the situational characteristics of the register, e.g., participants, relations among participants, channel, production circumstances, setting, communicative purposes, topic.
2. An analysis of the typical linguistic characteristics of the register.
3. Identification of the functional forces that help to explain the reason why those linguistic features tend to be associated with those particular situational characteristics.

The analysis of situational characteristics is deemed to be an essential point of departure for the linguistic analysis. This is because a register is closely tied to a specific situation. It has a specific communicative purpose. It is for this reason that I attempt to follow Biber and Conrad (2009) and describe, firstly, the situational characteristics of the e-mails under investigation. The second step includes a lexico-grammatical analysis of register features. This type of analysis is equally important but is beyond the scope of this paper. Finally, the authors assert that “it is useful to add an analysis of genre features when undertaking a register analysis in order to describe the text variety more fully” (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 69). Taking genre perspective on board, the discussion is confined to an analysis of the situational characteristics and selected genre features (genre markers) including genre marker deviations.

## Genre Markers

A quantitative genre analysis of conventionalized patterns of language use was applied. That is, the four selected genre characteristics—genre markers of the e-mail messages—were subjected to close examination in relation to three levels of formality (formal, neutral, informal):

- starting/opening of the e-mails/salutation, e.g., Hey John;

- ways of expressing thanks, e.g., acknowledging the e-mail or cheers for your e-mail;
- pre-closing formulae, e.g., Looking forward to your reply;
- ending/closing of the e-mail, e.g., All the best.

For the purposes of the quantitative investigation of the conventional, formulaic genre markers, a genre marker table depicted below (Table 2) was developed. Table 2 is composed of four columns and differentiates three levels of formality—formal, neutral, and informal. In examining each e-mail, an appropriate box with an appropriate genre marker was completed. To illustrate, Table 2 provides a number of genre markers with a set of prime examples. The section with examples serves the purpose of illustration and therefore it does not provide or aim to provide an exhaustive list of all possible genre markers which may appear in real-life e-mails and those under investigation. Further, it should be mentioned that the range of styles available to the writer is a continuum. The terms formal, informal, and neutral are treated here as a useful but inevitable simplification for the present research.

Table 2  
*Genre markers*

Genre markers	Formal	Neutral	Informal
	(polite, distant, indirect)	(semi-formal)	(friendly, personal, casual, direct)
Opening email	e.g. Dear Mr/Mrs X,	Dear X./Hello X,	Hi, Hi X, John (name only), nothing
Thanking	e.g. Thank you very much for your email ...	Thank you for your email ...	Thanks/Thanks a lot for your email. Cheers for your email ...
Pre-closing formulae	e.g. I look forward to/ I am looking forward to ...	I'm looking forward to ...	Looking forward to ...
Closing email	e.g. Yours faithfully/ Yours sincerely, Yours ever,	Best wishes,/Regards	Best/See you,/Cheers, Tom (writer's name only), Love, Hugs ...

**Data collection procedure.** All materials (informal e-mails) were gathered in the period 2009–2010 at the end of the semester as part of a mock examination. The written instructions were based on one of the practice FCE exam rubrics. Subsequently, a corpus of fifty-seven e-mail messages, with a total of 10,383 words, was compiled. All of the analyzed e-mails were complete texts of 130–200 words in length. Since linguistic features tend to vary across a register depending upon the situational characteristics, different relationships between the participants and the primary purposes of e-mail, I decided to examine one type of transactional e-mail, a sub-register. All e-mails were written by Czech learners of English at upper-intermediate level of proficiency in answer to the

same task as part of the First Certificate in English examination in which the writer is asked to provide the target reader, a friend, with the requisite provision of information and written in an appropriate (informal) style for the situation.

## Analysis

**Situational characteristics.** In keeping with Biber and Conrad (2009), I shall begin by describing the participants and relations among participants involved in the study.

**Participants and relations among participants.** The category of participants (addressor and addressee) is self-explanatory. Virtually every text is produced by someone and attributed to someone. For example, personal e-mail messages and personal letters tend to be addressed to an individual but can, of course, be addressed to multiple individuals. Social characteristics of the person (e.g., age, sex, level of education, social class) producing a text can have a profound effect on language choices. Similarly, the role of on-lookers must be taken into account in making language choices.

The consideration of the social role and personal relationships among participants is important as well. In many cases the participants are socially equal, for example, friends or classmates exchanging e-mail messages. Participants can also have different degrees of shared knowledge. For example, the description of your leisure time activities may vary depending on whether you are talking to your best friend or a stranger. In contrast with real-life e-mail messages in which the interaction can be immediate (or spread over days or weeks), the degree of interactiveness is in this research situation low. This is because the reader is not meant to reply at all. The two participants are said to be friends and are thus socially equal. The *addressors* are easily identifiable; they were young adults of Czech nationality between the ages of 18 and 25. Also, it must be noted that they were all students at the time of the beginning of the investigation. The students all took part in an intensive course and sat for the FCE mock-examination (*pomaturitní studium*) as part of their studies.

As for the gender of the participants, there were 41 females and 16 males in total. They all had been classified as being at the intermediate level of proficiency. Moreover, the majority of the learners had studied English as a foreign language previously at a secondary school in the Czech Republic. Most of them graduated with a pass in English, and Czech is their mother-tongue. In sum, the writers formed a homogenous group in terms of age, language level and learning background, nationality, and profession.



Regarding the intended reader, that is, *addressee*, their social role and personal relationship to participants: as based on FCE instructions, the informal e-mail message was essentially intended for a peer (a foreign friend), namely, for an individual reader. The writers were therefore expected to produce a personal e-mail using an informal or neutral register as well as appropriate genre markers, for example. The participants (authors of the e-mails) were, however, fully aware of the fact that the personal e-mail messages would be read by the examiner(s). The role of the on-lookers ought to be taken into consideration, and admittedly, cannot be ignored. It may be argued that the role of on-lookers is even more significant than that of an unknown addressee. In short, the influence of both should be recognized. In considering an appropriate sampling, I decided to follow a homogenous sampling strategy. That is, all the participants were young Czechs adults who participated in the same type of language program, were of upper-intermediate level of proficiency, and completed the mock test in identical exam conditions. It is felt that the focus on a homogenous group of Czech learners at a specific level of proficiency will be of benefit for present and prospective research studies.

**Channel, production circumstances and setting.** Generally, channel refers to the distinction between spoken and written language—speech vs. writing. The production circumstances are connected with the channel of communication. For instance, casual conversations usually allow very little time for planning, while written texts have greater editing possibilities. It must be noted that, in this study, the e-mail messages were not typed but handwritten. Moreover, the e-mails were produced in a very specific public setting, that is, in exam-like conditions at the Elvis language school. In addition, the e-mail messages were written within the required time limit and the exam was held in a public setting. Therefore, the time and place were equally shared by all of the test-takers. The writers had some time to plan what they were going to write—that is, the e-mails allowed opportunity for quick planning, editing, deleting, and revision. Admittedly, the setting (i.e., the time and place of interaction) including the type of channel, might have had a considerable impact on language choices. For instance, it may be argued that the language produced is not natural and was not written in natural conditions. While acknowledging that these specific means of expressing language can have a certain degree of influence upon the linguistic forms that the writers employed, it could also be argued that every text arises in a specific context, often with various and even hidden purposes and interests.

**Communicative purposes and topic.** Communicative purposes can be very general, for example, narrating or reporting past events, and relatively easy to identify. One parameter related to purpose is factuality. Does the ad-

dressor intend to convey, for example, factual, information, personal opinion or speculation or a mix of them? The final parameter concerns the expression of stance which includes both personal attitudes and epistemic stances. Topic can be of a very open or very specific category and this is of importance in making lexical choices. But it has no impact on the grammar of a language register. The e-mails under investigation combined several communicative purposes. The general communicative purposes of the e-mails were to convey four pieces of factual information (factuality) and to express personal opinion on a recent visit made by a friend and a future visit to the same friend. In other words, the e-mails were not only task-focused but interpersonal as well. More specifically, the purposes of the e-mails under study were to briefly inform the friend (Tom) about a more-than-three-hour delay on the way home (1), to tell Tom and perhaps describe which photos the writer likes best (2), to tell Tom about a found watch and about the place where it was found (3), and to tell Tom where the writer prefers to stay and why (4). This involved brief description and explanation of the problems, description of the photos and the watch, and giving holiday preferences. In terms of the topic, the instructions and e-mail combine the topics of the recent visit to a friend and upcoming mutual holiday plans.

**Genre markers analysis.** The linguistic features analyzed as part of a quantitative analysis included conventionalized patterns of language (genre markers) with regard to the level of formality. As is well-known, the use of conversational traits in written texts is connected with informality. By contrast, formality is tied to non-conversational and impersonal registers. While there is general agreement as to the conventions of very formal registers, there is greater variation in informal registers. Still, informal e-mails tend to adopt a lively and engaging style. They maintain a clear sense of address to a specific person. Also, they may include opening and closing salutations. As stated in the description of the situational characteristics, the writers under investigation form a homogenous group. The group may be regarded in a sense as a community with its own norms and conventions and ways of writing/speaking that are frequently taken for granted. It was therefore found relevant to examine the presence or absence of consistent textual conventions.

The act of greeting implies that a social encounter is taking place (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985, p. 216). And it is one of the aspects in e-mail communication. In fact, in the view of numerous scholars (e.g., Abbassi & Chen, 2005; Bunz & Campbell, 2002) openings and closings rank among the most salient structural features of an e-mail message and they encode social information. Also, they can be viewed as certain norms that structure and regulate conversations (cf. Baron, 2000). For instance, it is sometimes suggested that beginning an e-mail with a proper greeting shows friendliness and indicates the beginning of the message. At the same time, as previous research (e.g., Baron, 1998;

Biber & Conrad, 2009) has demonstrated, e-mail writers often dispense with conventional opening and closing routines. They are thus regarded as optional and conventional rather than compulsory and functional. This applies to both written and spoken varieties. For instance, everyday conversations do not often employ minimal conventions (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 70).

The acts of greeting and thanking the addressee formed the core of the study. In examining the e-mails from the genre perspective, the following textual conventions under investigation were used by the subjects. The majority of the e-mails under study begin with a friendly opening salutation *Hi + first name* followed by a comma (*Hi Tom*, 59%), (*Hello + first name*, 17%), and (*Dear + first name* 14%). Other, more casual opening expressions are far less frequent, such as *Hey Tom*, *Hi buddy*, name only, and nothing, amounting to 9% in total. Considering the data in greater detail, no severe violation in terms of the level of formality was observed. This is equally supported by the fact that the vast majority of the openings were followed by a comma, which generally implies a friendly, familiar, and sociable tone. As far as the function of the opening salutations is concerned, the present results indicate that they are still widely used; not only are they conventional but also functional as they seem to open up a “conversation”; and the most common ones (*Hi*, *Hello*) evoke a conversational tone. Yet it must be noted the use of openings is strongly endorsed in the learning and testing materials. In other words, learners are encouraged to use genre markers.

As far as the ways of expressing thanks are concerned, I first present the results of the optional thank-you-for-your-e-mail expressions (acknowledging the e-mail). The most common expression is the friendly *Thanks for your e-mail* (35%) followed by the neutral or slightly semi-formal *Thank you for your e-mail* (25%). Thirty-two percent of the samples did not acknowledge the e-mail at all. Rather, the writers began by explaining the reason as to why they arrived home late, complimenting and/or expressing their delight with the return journey.

In addition to acknowledging the e-mail, the writers in response to one of the tasks had a chance to express their thanks for photographs. The vast majority of the writers (70%) opted for more pragmatic and immediate evaluation of the photographs (e.g., *The photos are very nice, beautiful...*, etc.) without any thanks whatsoever. Other writers expressed their thanks explicitly by using such expressions as *Thanks for your photos* (21%), *Thank you for the photo* (7%), and 2% of the writers resorted to *I thank you also*.

Twenty-four percent of the writers used the explicit pre-closing formulae *I'm looking forward to seeing you*, while 16% of them opted for a slightly more formal expression, *I look forward to see(ing) you*, and 7% of them did not use pre-closing formulae. More casual expressions such as *I'm dying to see you*, (less formal) *Looking forward to you* were used by 7% of the writers. The results show other expressions such as *Write me soon*, *Have a nice/great time!*

*week/time*, but they were far less common. Overall, the optional pre-closing formulae caused difficulty in terms of the structure and phrasal verb choice. In The students either confused phrasal verbs, for example, *I am looking for your e-mail* (29), *I'm really looking after your e-mail* (25), or misapplied for an infinitive structure, e.g., *I look forward to see you* (47). *I'm looking forward to see you* (42). Finally, one writer struggled with spelling, i.e., *I'm daying to see you* (42).

It is also apparent that the closings of the e-mails varied considerably, ranging from casual *See you (soon)*, *Bye*, or no closing, to the more intimate *Love*. Amongst less frequent closings expressions included *Yours*, *Take care*, *With love*, *Best wishes*, and other informal closings such as *Hugs*, *Lots of love*, *Your loving friend*. Only one e-mail ended with the semi-formal *Best regards*. Similarly, one e-mail used a rather formal closing, *Yours sincerely*.

**Genre markers deviations and a comparison.** Before proceeding to discuss the results from the quantitative data analysis of the selected genre markers, it is necessary to recall that using statistical data in relation to deviation from any social norms is problematic. As we know, when the students avoid norms and apply less acceptable or unacceptable genre markers, we tend to conclude that there is something wrong with the piece of writing. However, there are at least four problems with this reasoning.

To begin with, the use of genre markers in particular and appropriate register in general may vary enormously across cultures. The second problem lies in the historical variation. While some genre features have been employed extensively in the past, this may no longer be the case today. For instance, some types of business events have a tendency to be more informal today than in the past. The third problem is controversial. In many cases, including here, what is socially and linguistically acceptable or unacceptable has been established by groups with social power. Last but not at all least, recognizing genre conventions may be viewed as a learning process in students' development. It is, therefore, not only associated with age, gender, and culture but also the level of proficiency of the learner.

The results from the quantitative data analysis of the selected genre markers show no frequent violations in terms of the level of formality in general. Rather, regarding the choice of formality, it was found that the optional pre-closing formulae caused difficulty, especially the structure and phrasal verb choice, for example, *I am looking for your e-mail* (29), *I'm really looking after your e-mail* (25), or incorrect an infinitive structure, for example, *I'm looking forward to see you* (42). In other words, the selected genre markers under investigation were marked by a large number of structural deviations rather than by frequent deviations from appropriate level of formality. In addition to the genre markers, inappropriate formality was found to be a feature linked to

individual cases; it was not found to be characteristic of the majority of the e-mails under study. Rather than consistently using of less acceptable expressions, and a very formal style throughout, most of the students committed occasional lapses. Considering the data and comparing them with those of native speaker studies, some similarities as well as differences can be observed. For example, Biber and Conrad (2009) investigated approximately the same number of e-mails addressed to one of the authors. According to their findings, among the opening and closing salutations of e-mails written by their friends and family members (all native speakers), there was a strong preference for name only opening and closing expressions, followed by frequent *Hi* (name) or first name only. Similarly, e-mail-signatures where a first name is used sometimes introduced with an expression of personal affection, for example, love, hugs (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 188) were commonplace.

## Conclusion

Respecting the above, several observations need to be made about the nature and functions of the aforementioned genre markers. Although genre markers are not primarily functional, their contribution cannot be ignored. First, the study shows that the genre markers under investigation are not pervasive in the texts. According to Biber and Conrad (2009) genre markers have a tendency to occur at a particular point in the texts, most commonly at the beginning and end of the text. In general, the opening and closing expressions were conventional. Other distinctive genre marker features often signaled a shift of a topic (cf. Swales's concept of moves). Second, it seems that the genre markers tend to evoke a "small talk." As a rule, rather than conveying information genre markers help to open, maintain and close conversation. Their role foregrounds the contact. Not only is their role phatic but conventional as well. As a consequence, the layout of the e-mails and the use of salient genre markers in boundaries bear similarities to a traditional (conventional) letter. All this seems to be particularly true of opening and closing formulae. Yet the thanking formulae were not found to be hollow polite phrases. Rather the use of these expressions seemed to show a genuine interest; the genre markers contributed substantially to the development and flow of the "conversation." Moreover, the use of these expressions helped the reader make sense of the text. Overall, the genre markers evoked turn-taking, guided the reader, and geared the texts towards a dialog.

Additionally, it is worth recalling that every text is *situation-bound* as well as *situation-determined*. Thus the specific context and situation in which a particular text is used have a considerable effect on its information structure and

its formal properties. And this, of course, also applies to the pieces of writing in this study.

Contrary to expectations, the results of the selected genre markers do not corroborate the assumption that most second-language writers of English should have substantial difficulty in applying the appropriate level of formality in the genre markers under investigation. But the results must be interpreted with a degree of caution. Given the task instructions and extensive practice and attention in modern teaching and learning material, the results of the genre markers were relatively predictable. While certain difficulties have been attested to genre marker lapses by individual writers, the problem merits further investigation. For instance, it would be beneficial to look at these considerations and challenges in a less circumscribed context (e.g., chat exchanges, e-forum postings, text messages), where a lack of intuition cannot be compensated for by such memorized genre markers as opening and closing lines.

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### **Zu E-Mail-Kommunikation von Nicht-Muttersprachlern vom Standpunkt einer Gattung aus**

#### Zusammenfassung

Der Verfasser untersuchte das Korpus von E-Mail-Nachrichten, die von tschechischen Schülern der höheren Mittelstufe englisch geschrieben wurden. Er bediente sich dabei der von Biber & Conrad (2009) formulierten Voraussetzungen der qualitativen Analyse. Der erste Teil des Beitrags konzentriert sich darauf, die Termini: Stil, Gattung und Register zu klären. Der zweite dagegen beinhaltet die Ergebnisse der Analyse von generischen Merkmalen, darunter der zu beobachtenden Abweichungen. Im dritten zusammenfassenden Teil schlägt der Verfasser vor, seine Untersuchungsergebnisse in weiteren Forschungen auszunutzen.