

LANGUAGE USE IN EMAILS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE CONTEXT
OF HIGHER EDUCATIONAL RELATIONS

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved family, who was always here to support and motivate me to continue my masters. I also dedicate this thesis to my supervisor, respected lecturers, and supportive friends that have been through thick and thin with me.

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ABSTRACT

Language used in emails is unique, diverse with no fixed format or fixed set of words to writing an email. Depending on situations, the purpose of communications and individuals' preference, language use would vary in different sets of email genres. Thus, this study attempted (1) to analyse the language structure use in emails between international institutions during COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and (2) to investigate the pattern of the language used in emails between the international institutions during COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This study utilized the qualitative case study design. The emails collected for the data analysis were attained from only one rich informant that exchanges emails daily with international institutions as their management tasks. 24 emails were selected for a comprehensive analysis of the language used based on two themes which are language structure and language pattern adopted from AlAfnan (2017). The results from this study showed that (1) there are 3 types of intertextuality or language structures employed by writers in the emails. Referential intertextuality was the most used language structure followed by functional intertextuality. Both of these structures were commonly found in the hybrid genre emails in this study. The Generic Intertextuality analysis reported that over half of the emails used the same generic structures which are the framing and content moves in forming their emails. Interestingly, quite several emails omit the compulsory framing moves of “signature”. Moreover, this study revealed that (2) informing genre (29.2%) is the most used genre followed by delivery email (8.3%) and enquiry email (8.3%). Taking into note, these three (informing + delivery, informing + enquiry and delivery + enquiry genres) are the hybrid genres detected. Writers employ both written and spoken language features with some non-verbal cues to help them delivered their messages while maintaining healthy partnerships. Thus, the variety of language structure and language patterns give awareness and guidelines to whoever wants to write an email and that writers are free to choose their writing style. The significance, limitations and implications of the study were also discussed in the study. Lastly, recommendations were suggested to widen the context of the study of language use in emails especially in the context of international relations and in different types of crises.

ABSTRAK

Penggunaan bahasa dalam menulis e-mel adalah unik, pelbagai, tiada format yang tetap dan tiada kosa kata yang tetap. Bergantung pada situasi, tujuan komunikasi dan keutamaan individu, penggunaan bahasa akan pelbagai mengikut genre e-mel yang berbeza. Oleh itu, kajian ini berusaha (1) untuk menganalisis penggunaan struktur bahasa dalam e-mel antara institusi antarabangsa semasa krisis pandemik COVID-19, dan (2) untuk menyelidiki corak bahasa yang digunakan dalam e-mel antara institusi antarabangsa semasa krisis pandemik COVID-19. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk kajian kes kualitatif. E-mel yang dikumpulkan untuk analisis data diperoleh daripada seorang informan yang sering bertukar e-mel setiap hari dengan institusi antarabangsa sebagai tugas pengurusan mereka. 24 e-mel telah dipilih untuk analisis bahasa yang komprehensif dan berdasarkan dua tema iaitu struktur bahasa dan corak bahasa yang diadopsi dari AlAfnan (2017). Hasil dari kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa (1) terdapat 3 jenis intertekstualiti atau struktur bahasa yang digunakan oleh penulis dalam e-mel. Intertekstualiti rujukan adalah struktur bahasa yang paling banyak digunakan diikuti oleh intertekstualiti fungsi. Kedua-dua struktur ini biasanya terdapat dalam e-mel yang bergenre hybrid. Analisis Intertekstualiti Generik melaporkan bahawa lebih daripada separuh e-mel menggunakan struktur generik yang sama iaitu langkah *framing* dan langkah kandungan dalam membentuk e-mel mereka. Menariknya, beberapa e-mel telah mengabaikan langkah *framing* iaitu langkah wajib “tandatangan”. Tambahan lagi, kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa (2) genre maklumat (29.2%) adalah genre yang paling banyak digunakan diikuti dengan e-mel penghantaran (8.3%) dan e-mel pertanyaan (8.3%). Perlu diberi perhatian juga kepada tiga genre hybrid yang ditemui iaitu genre memberitahu + penghantaran, genre memberitahu + pertanyaan dan genre penghantaran + pertanyaan. Penulis menggunakan teknik bahasa bertulis dan lisan dengan beberapa isyarat bukan lisan untuk membantu mereka menyampaikan mesej mereka sambil mengekalkan perhubungan yang baik. Oleh itu, kepelbagaian struktur bahasa dan corak bahasa dapat memberikan kesedaran dan panduan kepada sesiapa yang ingin menulis e-mel dan penulis bebas memilih gaya penulisannya. Kepentingan, batasan dan implikasi kajian juga dibincangkan dalam kajian ini. Terakhir, cadangan disarankan untuk memperluas konteks kajian penggunaan bahasa dalam e-mel terutama dalam konteks hubungan antarabangsa dan dalam berbagai jenis krisis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	TITLE	PAGE
	DECLARATION	iii
	DEDICATION	iv
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	v
	ABSTRACT	vi
	ABSTRAK	vii
	TABLE OF CONTENTS	viii
	LIST OF TABLES	xi
	LIST OF FIGURES	xii
	LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xiii
	LIST OF SYMBOL	xiv
	LIST OF APPENDICES	xv
CHAPTER 1	INTRODUCTION	1
1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Background of the Study	2
1.3	Statement of Problem	5
1.4	Research Objectives	7
1.5	Research Questions	8
1.6	Conceptual Framework	8
1.7	Scope and Limitations	10
1.8	Significance of the Study	10
1.9	Operational Definition of Terms	12
	1.9.1 Language Structures	12
	1.9.2 Language Patterns	12
	1.9.3 Genre	13
1.10	Conclusion	13

CHAPTER 2	LITERATURE REVIEW	15
2.1	Introduction	15
2.2	Studies on Emails	15
	2.2.1 Email in Business Context	16
	2.2.2 Email in Workplace Context	18
2.3	Studies on Language Used during Crisis	19
2.4	Approaches to Email Analysis	21
	2.4.1 Critical Discourse Analysis	21
	2.4.2 Genre Analysis	22
	2.4.3 Language Structure and Patterns in Emails	24
2.5	Culture Relation to Email Communication	27
2.6	Conclusion	28
CHAPTER 3	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	31
3.1	Introduction	31
3.2	Research Design	33
3.3	Population and Sample	33
3.4	Research Instruments	33
3.5	Instrument Validity	34
3.6	Data Collection	34
3.7	Data Analysis	35
3.8	Conclusion	35
CHAPTER 4	FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	37
4.1	Introduction	37
4.2	Language Structures	38
	4.2.1 Referential Interrelationship	38
	4.2.2 Functional Intertextuality	42
	4.2.3 Generic Intertextuality	47
4.3	Language Patterns	55
	4.3.1 Four Types of Genres	55
	4.3.2 Hybrid Genres	59
	4.3.3 Hybrid Styles	63

	4.3.4 Non-verbal Cues	65
4.4	Conclusion	68
CHAPTER 5	CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	69
5.1	Introduction	69
5.2	Summary of the Findings	69
5.3	Pedagogical Implication	71
5.4	Limitations of Study	72
5.5	Recommendation for Future Research	73
5.6	Conclusion	74
REFERENCES		75
APPENDICES		81

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE NO.	TITLE	PAGE
Table 2.1	Summary of studies on language in crisis.	19
Table 2.2	Highlighted Findings of Previous Researches by AlAfnan	26

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE NO.	TITLE	PAGE
Figure 1.1	The Generic structures of emails adopt from AlAfnan (2017)	9
Figure 2.1	The CARS Model (Swales, 1990, p.141)	23
Figure 3.1	Overall procedure for collection and analysis of data	32
Figure 4.1	Email Example 1	39
Figure 4.2	Other examples of the appearance of past texts	40
Figure 4.3	Example of Email 2	42
Figure 4.4	Email Example 3	43
Figure 4.5	Email Example 4	45
Figure 4.6	Email Example 5	46
Figure 4.7	Example of Email 6	48
Figure 4.8	Email Example 7	49
Figure 4.9	Email Example 8	50
Figure 4.10	Example of email with the sign move	51
Figure 4.11	Example of opening	52
Figure 4.12	Email sample 9	54
Figure 4.13	Informing email sample	57
Figure 4.14	Sample of delivery email	58
Figure 4.15	Sample of enquiry email	59
Figure 4.16	Email sample for informing + delivery	60
Figure 4.17	Sample of email 10	61
Figure 4.18	email sample for delivering + enquiring email	62
Figure 4.19	Email sample 11	64
Figure 4.20	Capitalization example	65
Figure 4.21	Font size,colour, bold and underline example	66
Figure 4.22	Sample of usage of an exclamation mark	67

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CARS	-	Creating a Research Space Model
CDA	-	Critical Discourse Analysis
COVID19	-	Coronavirus Disease 2019
UTM	-	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
WHO	-	World Health Organization

LIST OF SYMBOLS

<	-	Open angle bracket
>	-	Close angle bracket
@	-	At or address sign in email
!	-	Exclamation mark
[]	-	Square brackets

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX	TITLE	PAGE
Appendix A	Permission Letter	81
Appendix B	Emails Collection	83

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Rapid development of the science and technology field results in many new emergences of online platforms, software and applications that can be used in communicating throughout the world. Emails are one of the most used platforms and are still increase in the number of users each year. Development of email with widespread usage in the past twenty years for tasks communication in professional and private use (Phillips & Reddie, 2007; Utz, 2007) makes it the most important evolution in communication and technology. Email had become an established communication medium that consists of verbal and written media (Tassabehji & Vakola, 2005). It is used widely in many fields and areas such as business, administration, education and many more. Looking into educational settings nowadays, most of the teaching materials are shared through online platforms such as email is one of the main mediums in communicating between educators, students, and academic staff and between institutions every day. Besides that, emails help in establishing collaborations globally which involves both local and international educational institutions (Hadi, 2020). Because of this, people need to understand the use of language in email communication for effective communication.

In 2019, a novel virus, Coronavirus or COVID-19 was identified from Wuhan, China. It has been spreading to other parts of the world with over 209 countries being infected with the disease (AlAfnan, 2020) and over 823626 confirmed cases of infection (WHO, 2020). And on 11th March 2020, this virus had been declared to be a pandemic with no cure yet by The World Health Organization (WHO) and thus become a world crisis that involves health of people also economy to be impacted. Because of this pandemic, people are restricted to go around and all the communication was mostly done via the online platform to avoid spreading of the

virus. In the educational institutions, emails were used not only between lecturers and students but also by the local and international institutions to deliver the messages. Thus this study focuses on the email exchange between the educational institutions internationally at the time of crisis.

This study will investigate the use of language based on two areas which are the language structures and the language patterns in emails between international institutions. Language structures of emails explained on the association between the previous or past emails in producing the new emails. On the other hand, language patterns focus on the email genres and email styles that occur during the interaction. In this chapter, the overview of language structures and language patterns in email between local and international higher educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis will be explained. The elements that will be explained are the background of the study, statement of problem, research objectives, research questions, study significance, limitation of study and the conceptual framework that will be used for conducting this research.

1.2 Background of the Study

Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak across the world had affects the sector of e-commerce, technology, business travel, and the economy (Hasanat et al, 2020) which leads to Malaysian government to impose the Movement Control Order (MCO). Due to this MCO, educational institutions in Malaysia, including primary education, secondary and tertiary education are postponed and conducted from home. No face-to-face contact or physical attendances are allowed in educational institutions. Thus this makes the communication take place mainly using emails. The institutions also stay connected using online platforms such as emails and video conferences. In facing a crisis, the usage of language would differ, as, during this time, many people are in a panic and sensitive state. Communicating clearly and effectively is crucial especially during a crisis to avoid misunderstanding and causing more panic (O'Brien and Cadwell, 2017). This makes it important to see how the Malaysian institutions and international educational institutions use the language

during this outbreak to deliver messages and also gives comfort and reaffirmation on the current crisis faced.

In 2016, the Radicati Group reported that there were over 215.3 billion emails that were sent and received daily for both the business and consumer. It was estimated to increase by 4.6% in average by the year 2020 with estimated number of 257.7 billion. In the subsequent research by Radicati group, in 2018, it was then reported that the emails sent and received were over 281 billion per day and will increase exponentially over the years. This year, 2020, it was informed that the emails that were sent and received were over 306.4 billion daily as the number of worldwide email accounts continuously grows at a faster rate than email users numbers.

With the massive growth in the number of email usage by users, it can denote that this technology of communication must pose some or a huge impact on the language (Hadi, 2020). Poor language competency, different discourse communities and unfamiliarity with the norms and values of the target community or culture may result in misunderstanding, confusion and miscommunication to occur during this process of delivering and receiving information. The skills to employ suitable communication strategies and speech act in emails are vital and should be stressed on (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000) by email users. The functions of the communication via the emails will determine the feature types that users will use, as email exchanges contain both the spoken and written form (AlAfnan, 2015c). This means that structure and patterns of language in emails should be given more consideration and study by researchers.

The interdependence between emails, which is the occurrence of previous text in another text especially new text and also creating new text with reference of the past text, is the focus of language structures analysis. Devitt (1991) mentioned that by denoting the previous text to develop the newer email context, it facilitates the users to accomplish their work. This is basically how the educational institutions' workers or staff members link the previous text with future texts in carrying out their institutional and professional duties (AlAfnan, 2017). AlAfnan (2017) also states that

reference of past texts can be identified by these linguistics construct, "please find attached" , "in accordance with the...." or when writer copy and paste some parts of previous email texts into the new one. The repeated rhetorical forms in repeated rhetorical situations which occur in moves (Swales, 1990) can also indicate the language structures that exist in email text writing.

Next, the interactions of email genres and styles in email writing are focused when examining language patterns. There was four emails genre identified by AlAfnan (2015a) in his study that was classified into discussion email genre, enquiry email genre, delivery email genre, informing email genre. The way email users consigned the generic resources in a genre to generate the other genre is also part of language patterns as it includes the exploration of 'hybrid genres' and 'hybrid styles'. These 'hybrid genres' are formed when two types of email genres are combined into one email post by writers. Some examples of hybrid email genres are discussion-enquiry and discussion-informing genres. Hybrid style consists of the spoken and written styles features combination in emails by users that include non-verbal features (AlAfnan, 2017).

Bhatia (2010) states that language patterns, especially for professional discourse, are more vital than language structures. This is because the language patterns look at different genres, professional practices and cultures to construct and interpret text-external resources. Most studies on language usage in emails focus on the exchange of emails that occur in the business sector and the corporate sector (Gains, 1999; Cassel & Tversly, 2005). Not much attention was given to the language used in the educational sector (AlAfnan, 2014) especially between local and international institutions. Language patterns do not only look into the writing and speech features such as lexicon, syntax, repetition, ellipses and substitutions but also emphases on non-verbal cues usage in emails; capitalization, colours, fonts, print choices and emoticons included in emails. In different situations, writers of text will use different language features and manner such as politeness and choice of words to avoid misunderstandings.

1.3 Statement of Problem

Email is a widely known communication technology that is being used by majority of people in the world. Nowadays, many people are using Internet as a channel for them to complete their work and education. The Internet is also useful during business and commercial dealings (Isa & Latiff, 2020). Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2018) reported that based on their survey, they find out that 61.9% of Internet users utilized it to facilitate and completing their tasks related to their work. Statistica (2019) discover that from January 2012 to October 2018, the number of Gmail users increase greatly until they had over 1.5 billion active users in 2018.

Email is seen as an established communication medium (Gains, 1999) that helps in sending official documents and sharing information for individuals' use and organizational use. People are relying heavily on the email usage in their daily life to have effective communication with the noteworthy development in the Internet, technology, social networks and mobile applications. The use of emails for organizational communication is considered inevitable, especially when an organization establishes partnerships with international companies or institutions (AlAfnan, 2014).

Malaysian educational institutions have international reputation and their ranking in the world and in Malaysia is important. Each year, the educational institutions aim to get their ranking higher to increase their reputation (Hadi, 2020). Some universities in Malaysia that listed in top 120 rank based on the QS Asia University Rankings 2020 are University of Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Universiti Teknologi Petronas (UTP) and Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) (QS Top Universities, 2020). These universities can be seen to be conducting business with the international educational institutions and also forms collaboration that focuses on education fields. For them to stay connected and communicate, they use electronic communication such as emails.

Emails are established and use as the formal platform and communication medium for both the local and international educational institutions. It is utilized both for personal and workplace use to complete their tasks. However, there were no standard of fixed format or rules given also no sets of words that they must essentially use in different emails for different situations when it is written. Writers may need these rules to help them write emails as emails have both written and spoken language features and is a hybrid discourse. Having a guideline or controlled language, it helps to reduce the language complexity and ambiguity that leads to miscommunication (Temnikova & Margova, 2009). Email users may think that restriction of traditional writing rules to be unconventional; but they may face difficulties in constructing the suitable email for their recipients (Chen, 2006).

In 2020, the coronavirus or COVID-19 causes a pandemic outbreak all around the world. This outbreak had restricted many movements that involve the crowd or mass of peoples which includes religious, sports, social and cultural activities, traveling outside and inside the country, restriction in foreigners coming into Malaysia and many more. It became a big crisis that is faced by the whole world and Malaysia is one of it. Malaysia had applied Movement Control Order (MCO) strictly for few months with the targets of flattening the curve of the pandemic cases to occur and ensuring the national health recovery rates are high by social distancing and staying at home (Azizan, Ismail & Qaiwer, 2020). Due to this outbreak and MCO, the educational sectors are closed down and communication was conducted via online applications such as email. The local and international institutions also stay connected via the emails especially in discussing, enquiring or delivering messages.

Previous studies focused on the communication made using emails within institutions in Malaysia. They focus on the emails send between the universities' staff, lecturers and administrative staff. They also focus on the politeness in writing emails between close colleagues and between distant colleagues to see which relationship uses a more polite writing manner in emails. None had analysed the email exchange between the local and international educational institutions especially during this COVID-19 crisis. As both local and international parties values

their partnership, it would be beneficial for the researcher to analysed and explore the emails communications in the context of internationalisation. And no researches on emails done during COVID-19 were conducted. People when face with crisis; tend to be sensitive and supportive to reassure they are just fine. The language chosen in delivering their messages to others may be distinct compared to everyday life without the catastrophe. Thus, it would be valuable to identify any unique language structures and language patterns use to reassure of the partnership despite the crisis on pandemic. As the email exchange during COVID-19 pandemic, there could be unique language structures and patterns use by writer resulting in new hybrid styles and genres.

1.4 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to find out the email communication language used that occurs between a Malaysian educational institutions with the international institutions. This study has two main objectives in finding out the language used in the email exchange. The objectives are listed as below:

- i. To analyse the language structure use in emails between international institutions during COVID-19 pandemic crisis
- ii. To investigate the pattern of language used in emails between the international institutions during COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

The first objective is looking at the relation and connection that happen among and across email text. For second objective, it is to inspect interactions occur among and across genres and writing styles of email texts.

1.5 Research Questions

There are two research questions arise from the research objectives for this study. The research questions are as below:

- i. What are the language structures found in emails between international institutions during COVID-19 pandemic?
- ii. What are the language patterns uses in emails between international institutions during COVID-19 pandemic?

1.6 Conceptual Framework

AlAfnan (2015a) as he evaluates the email communication communicative purposes, he categorised the email genres into four types that are utilized by professional in educational institutions. Those four genres he identified were discussion email genre, enquiry email genre, delivery email genre and informing email genre. This study investigates the use of language in emails in the context of internationalization between institutions by adopting the critical views of genre analysis and the four different kinds of email genres. The researchers would like to investigate and analyse the language pattern that is the interactions between and across genres and styles and also the language structures use in emails which are the interdependence between and across emails writing between international institutions.

AlAfnan's combined framework of moves for each patterns of email genres and what is language structure and pattern (Hadi, 2020) are show in Figure 1.1 below as references. This helps to show the generic structures of email corpus that are utilized in this study along with the research process flow to show how they are interconnected.

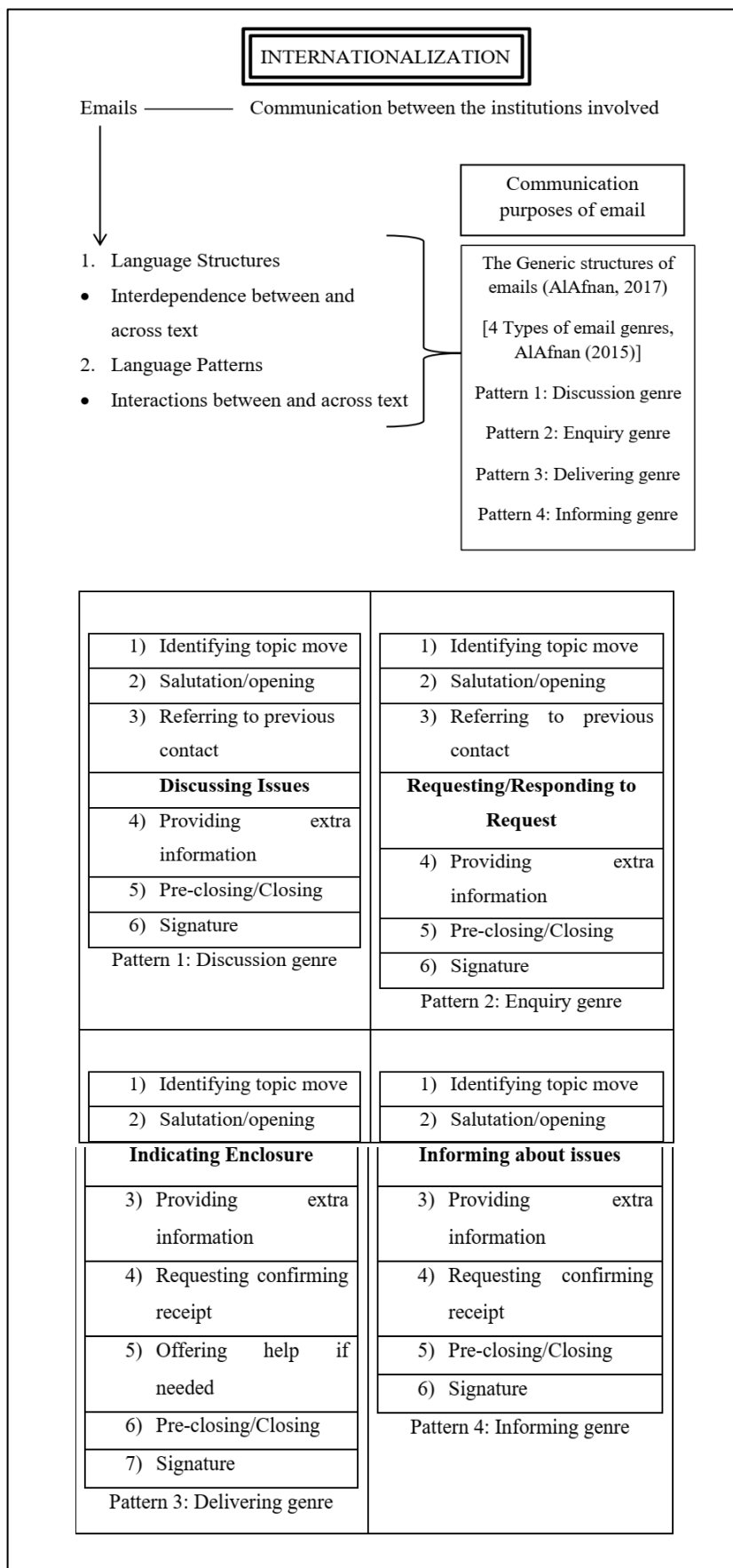


Figure 1.1 The Generic structures of emails adopt from AlAfnan (2017)

1.7 Scope and Limitations

This study will only use one informant who is continuously engaged and exchange emails with the international institutions to gain the messages that will be analysed. This study is a qualitative design. Thus, it will fully analyse the emails communication between a Malaysian university with some international institutions of education. This influence the sample size of this study to be small and limited. In addition, this study only includes emails exchanged that occur between the informant and the international educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

1.8 Significance of the Study

Conducting this study on language structures and language patterns in context of internationalisation will benefit these three parties which are the universities staff, educators and students (Hadi, 2020). For the universities staff members, it will facilitate them in their task as they are the one who is managing the partnership or collaboration that happens between both local and international institutions. When they know and aware of the language structures and language patterns of emails writing, they can use those as reference in constructing appropriate emails that meets their recipients' standard. This is important especially in delivering messages to the recipients that are from different countries.

The guideline in email writing does not only apply for sending emails between institutions but also can be referred to send emails among universities staff. Even though people can write e-mails to peers in whichever way they like which they considered to be an easy task, writing to superiors seems to be a problem. They need to write in a manner where it is polite, using suitable words or phrases and formats to ensure their superior are satisfied and able to understand their emails writing. Past researches had shown that people in the workplace usually feel uncomfortable when writing e-mails to those perceived as being of higher status especially when they need to establish communication, propose new ideas ,

make requests and voicing out disagreement or criticism (Baron, 1998, 2000; Kling, 1996; Murray, 1988, 1995).

Next, educators and students can profit from the knowledge of this study because although emails have indeed been established as a universal method of communication, it is not without challenges the medium could be used. This study finding could give guidelines for students in practicing and producing an efficient, suitable email to send or respond to especially in the formal settings. Eventually, the students are going to work in an organization, so they should equip themselves with the knowledge on how to construct and send an effective email. During their studies also, they are required to write a lot of emails to their professors, lecturers, universities staff, companies and job employers. Educators can advantage from this as they can utilize the guidelines to teach students how to formulate professional emails since for such uses there seem to be no official guidelines made before.

Language used will be distinct depending on the communicative purpose, the situation and the writers. Writing in crisis would be quite different as compared to when they write during the normal day. During crisis, the word chosen and language features practice by people tend to be polite and comforting as they are indicating that they understand the situation and are supporting us. And as emails are broadly used all across the world, many people who actually depend on email heavily as a communication medium either for personal use or work purpose could also benefit from this study. Becoming aware of the language structures and language patterns would facilitate their email writing skills especially it making sure they are utilizing the suitable language features in crisis to avoid any miscommunication or mentioning about sensitive issues. Therefore, it is highly valued to examine the email writing system since it is something that is continuously developing regardless of the advancement of Internet, social networks and mobile applications in this century.

1.9 Operational Definition of Terms

This section consists of the operational terms that are significant in this study and are used in describing and discussing the study.

1.9.1 Language Structures

There are two types of intertextuality or language structures that are horizontal intertextuality and vertical intertextuality (Kristeva, 1986). AlAfnan (2017) explained, horizontal intertextuality discusses on the interrelationship between certain texts with other texts following it while vertical intertextuality refers to the connection between certain texts and other texts that constitute its immediate or distant context. The language structures in the context of this study are focusing on the interrelationship or interconnection between and across emails exchange that take place between the institutions. The interrelationship between and across the emails for this study is the occurrences of past emails in the newer emails, the reference of these past emails and its relevance in producing newer emails (Bhatia, 2010, p.392) and also the repeated rhetorical forms in repeated rhetorical situations (Devitt, 1991) which occurs in the 'moves'. This study will focus on why and how email messages were written in such manners, and whether other emails had any influence on the language utilization of the new emails.

1.9.2 Language Patterns

Looking at the setting of this study, the language patterns look into the interactions that occur between and across the writing genres and writing styles. The objective of this study is to examine the language use in email exchange as a medium of communication among local and international educational institutions. There are four different email genre types that were acknowledged by AlAfnan (2015a) that are adopted for this study data analysis. Those four email genre types are discussion email genre, enquiry email genre, courier email genre and informing email genre.

There were also occurrences of hybrid genres in the email text detected by AlAfnan (2017). The email writing styles analyse the combination of speaking and writing styles of language writing in emails and hybrid styles could be form due to the mixture of the two features. Elements in the language styles include lexicon and non-verbal cues such as colours, capitalization, print and font choices and emoticons when writing emails. It also looks at the repetition usage, ellipses and substitutions used for the speaking styles.

1.9.3 Genre

Fairclough (1992) points out that a genre infers not only a certain text types, but particular processes of creating, distributing and consuming texts. In the context of this study, genre refers to the four email writing genres detected by AlAfnan (2015a). These genres are discussion email genre, enquiry email genre, delivery email genre and informing email genre where it will be used as the basis to analyse the language patterns used in the email exchange as a communication method. These genres demonstrated the communicative goals of professional emails, and each encompasses distinct styles as four different generic email structures. The similar and different ‘moves’ make the email patterns to be unique and will differentiate the communicative goals.

1.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study will analyse the language used in email communication in-depth focusing on the COVID-19 situations. The analysis will adopt the model and types of email genres from previous studies by AlAfnan as reference. This study investigates the email communication in context of internationalization in a professional environment during the COVID-19 crisis. The reason why this study is looking in the internationalization context is to see the language usage in particular education institutions with the associate institutions from different countries. Language used especially during crisis could also vary

compared to other emails writing. Significance of conducting this research can be reflected from previous researchers in email communication associated with language analysis that will be mentioned in literature review.

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