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## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### Opening and Closing Rituals in Email Exchanges Between the Librarians and the Library Patrons

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The study examined the specific features of the opening and closing rituals in email exchanges used by the librarians in contrast to the patrons at an American university. Data for this study included 472 emails (236 patrons' queries; 236 librarians' responses) drawn randomly from a pool of over 3,000 email threads from October 2007 to April 2011 from the university library. Although there were cases where the librarians and patrons did not use opening or closing rituals, the results indicate that the librarians used openings and closings more frequently than the patrons. These results were compared and contrasted with the findings reported by Park, Li, and Burger (2010).

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## INTRODUCTION

In his study of human communication, Goffman (1976) proposed eight universal system constraints: opening and closing signals, backchannel signals, turnover signals, acoustically adequate interpretable messages, bracket signals, nonparticipant constraints, preempt signals, and a set of Gricean norms. These eight elements compose our communication system. Yet how people meet these constraints varies according to the specific language and culture. Furthermore, the ways in which these constraints are met differ in different channels. For example, in the channels of phone calls, emails, lectures, each forum demands unique ways of realizing the system constraints.

The study examined the specific features of the opening and closing rituals in email exchanges used by the librarians in contrast to the patrons at an American university. The following two research questions guided this study a) what are the features of the opening rituals in email exchanges used by the librarians in contrast to the patrons? And b) what are the features of the closing rituals in email exchanges used by the librarians in contrast to the patrons?

## A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE

In addition to the eight universal system constraints, Goffman (1976) claimed that there is another set of universal constraints, which smooth social interactions as well as interact with the system constraints — ritual constraints. Understanding the ritual constraints can help our communication flow in an appropriate way. Hatch (1992) further explained that we and our communication partners are people of social worth.

In all human communication, speakers very rarely open or close the communication abruptly. Hatch (1992) pointed out there must be ways to show that the communication is about to start and then starts, and ways to indicate that it is about to end and then ends. If we open and close our communication abruptly, we might be considered rude, or unwilling to join the communication. Yet, how the communication is opened and closed differs according to the channels.

With the development of information technology, people can communicate with others more frequently and easily (Cowan & Menchaca, 2014; Falloon, 2011; Hiltz & Turoff, 2005; McCrea, 2013; Murphrey, Arnold, Foster, & Degenhart, 2012; Natarajan, 2006; Ravid, Kalman, & Rafaeli, 2008; Russell & Shepherd, 2010; Tekinarslan, 2011). Nowadays, a lot of communication is done through emails. Braxton and Brunsdale (2004) reported that email reference has become a substitute for library receptionists as email reference service has several advantages over other reference venues. First of all, email reference is a low pressure venue for both the patrons and the librarians in that they can take their time to compose their questions and answers. In addition, the librarians' written answers can be referred by the patrons easily. Moreover, email reference may promote communication and networking among librarians and staff within a library and even among several consortium libraries to provide the patrons with better service.

Specifically, Park, Li, and Burger (2010) examined the opening and closing rituals of the virtual reference service of the Internet Public Library (IPL). They compared opening and closing rituals to a handshake in face-to-face communication, which not only sets the initial tone for the upcoming interpersonal communication, but also helps to sustain positive social interactions. In the study, they examined a total of 400 transcripts comprising user queries and responses by IPL librarians, with 200 emails from the patrons and 200 from the librarians. Park et al. (2010) reported that during the course of offering help to patrons, the librarians attentively employed the verbal politeness indicators and structural politeness indicators. One hundred percent of the librarians used openings such as greeting expressions, acknowledgements, address forms and self-introduction. In contrast, only five percent of the patrons used openings like greeting expressions and self-introduction. In terms of closings, 99.5 percent of the librarians used closing elements, which included acknowledgements, farewell salutations, signatures including the sender's name and follow up invitations. However, only 22.5 percent of the patrons closed their email with acknowledgements, farewell salutations or signatures including the sender's name. Apparently, most library users in this study did not comply with the universal system and ritual constraints that all human communication includes opening and closing signals and rituals.

Furthermore, Park et al (2010) argued that in addition to trying to maintain clarity, there is usually a strong tendency for people to avoid greeting or addressing the other party that they do not know. The researcher expressed a strong disagreement. A simple *hi* in the beginning and *thank you* at the end would not harm the clarity of request. One possible reason why IPL patrons did not use openings and closings is not because of that users have not had any previous engagement with IPL librarians (Park et al., 2010), but rather they did not know to whom they were writing to. In other words, the recipient is unspecific. To explore this issue in depth, the researcher of this study collected data from the library at an American university to investigate both the librarians' and patrons' employment of openings and closings.

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

At this American university, there are two channels of email queries for the library patrons to receive reference service from the librarians. One is to "email a reference librarian", through which patrons can file an online form to submit a question. The patrons are asked to provide their names, email addresses, and their university affiliations, indicating whether they are students, faculty, alumnus, university library associates or unaffiliated with the university. It is obvious that in this type of email, the patrons will not be able to know to whom they are writing.

The other type of email channel is to "ask a subject specialist". If the patrons choose to request this type of reference service, they will be able to know to whom they are writing, including the addressee's name, title, specialty, email address and phone number. In order to find out how the opening and closing cues are realized in the two different types of email exchanges at the library, data were collected from both channels.

## METHODS

Data for this study included 250 threads of emails drawn randomly from a pool of over 3,000 email threads from October 2007 to April 2011 from the university library. To be more specific, 50 threads were drawn from each year to keep the balance of data representation. After the data collection, each thread of emails was examined carefully to strip out follow-ups. In other words, the first round of email exchanges and follow-ups were analyzed separately as they might be affected by different factors. Also, each query should have a corresponding reply and vice versa. Therefore, the emails that were forwarded to other librarians but not responding directly to the patron did not qualify this study. Likewise, the emails were excluded if they could not be traced back to the original query. After this process, 472 emails (236 patrons' queries; 236 librarians' responses) remained for the final analysis.

Further, 45 threads of emails were obtained from subject specialists on a voluntary basis. The same rubric was applied in data control and 29 threads of emails qualified for the study. Analysis included the calculation of frequencies and follow-up interviews with the librarians and patrons.

In order to keep consistency with Park et al.'s (2010) study, the coding categories for opening and closing elements were adopted from Park et al. (2010) with slight adjustment as shown in the following tables.

Table 1

*The Coding Categories, Description and Some Examples of Opening Elements*

Codes	Descriptions	Examples
No opening	No use of greetings and other linguistic elements to engage conversation before mentioning formal content of subject matter.	N/A
Greeting expressions	Express salutation or greetings	Hi! Hello! Dear ...
Acknowledgements	Express thankfulness or appreciations to the recipient of the message	Thanks for your question. Thank you for the opportunity to inquire here.
Address forms/ Naming	Greetings and salutation followed with the name * of the recipient of the message	Dear Jack, Dear Sir or Madam, To whom it may concern, Dear librarian,
Self-introduction	Introduce one's name or job title or background	I'm a graduate student. I'm an alumna.

\*Note: The patrons wrote to unspecific recipients, it was impossible to address the receiver by his or her name. Thus, *Dear Sir or Madam, Dear librarian* is the best they could do. The researcher counted these as address forms.

The actual coding was done by the researcher manually to achieve coder stability because it is almost impossible for computers to count the number of emails that included address forms which drastically varied. Moreover, there were ambiguous examples.

However, whenever there was ambiguity and uncertainty, the coding was discussed with a second person to maximize the objectivity.

Table 2  
*The Coding Categories, Description and Some Examples of Closing Elements*

Codes	Description	Examples
No closing elements	No use of closure or conducting statements to indicate the end of the interaction	N/A
Acknowledgements	Express thankfulness to the recipient of the message	Thank you for your interest in the University and its unique resources and collections. Many thanks in advance for all your help. *I would be so grateful for a reply.
Farewell/ending Salutations	Express farewell to end the interactions	Best (regards), Sincerely, Have a nice day
Signature using sender's name	Use signature by sender's name	Jack, John
Invitation for follow-up/ Referral	Ask the user to come back for further assistance; or refer the user to other reference services; Invite for further contact.	Please contact us if you have any further questions. I look forward to hearing back from you. Thanks for a reply in advance*.

*\*Note: Park et al (2010) coded examples like "I would be so grateful for a reply" as acknowledgement. The researcher classified these examples as invitation for follow-ups, since the purpose is inviting further contact.*

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The employment of the opening rituals in email exchanges used by the librarians in contrast to the patrons was reported and discussed, followed by the employment of the closing rituals.

### The Employment of Opening Rituals

The frequencies of the employment of opening elements by the library librarians and patrons are shown in Table 3. As shown in Table 3, the librarians used rather sufficient openings in welcoming patrons to their online reference service. In terms of the librarians' replies to the patrons' inquires, address forms (85.6%) were the most frequently occurring type of opening rituals, followed by greeting expressions (73.73%), acknowledgements (2.12%), and self introduction (1%).

Table 3  
*The Employment of Opening Rituals of the Librarians and Patrons*

<i>Email a Librarian Channel</i>	The Librarians		The Patrons	
	N	%	N	%
No opening	30	12.7	131	55.5
Greeting expressions	174	73.73	79	33.5
Acknowledgements	5	2.12	5	2.1
Address forms/naming	202	85.6	27	11.4
Self-introduction	2	1	45	19.1

The following is a librarian's response randomly taken from the data demonstrates an opening ritual by the librarians:

*Hello Tom (pseudoname). Thank you for your question. There are some databases Alumni may access from off campus. These are available from <http://www.library.georgetown.edu/alumni>. You will need to login with your netid and password (different from the procedure when you were a student) ... If you need access to dissertations, you may want to check...*

The opening ritual in the above illustration provides an example of employment of various linguistic politeness strategies that narrow the social distance between the two participants in the communication. Greeting expressions such as "hello" with the combination of the patron's first name lower the level of formality and create a warm and friendly starting atmosphere. The librarian further created solidarity with the patron by thanking for his question. This may make the patron feel welcomed and encourage the patron for further contact.

On the other hand, opening rituals were realized differently in patrons' queries. The following is an example of it:

*Hi, I am a graduate student at the school of xx at xx University. I'm doing my thesis on xx...*

In the above example, the patron greeted the receiver without the person's name. Then she introduced herself and got down to business. As shown, in terms of the patrons' queries, the greeting expressions (33.5%) were the most frequently used opening cues, followed by self-introductions (19.1%), address forms (11.4%), and acknowledgements (2.1%). Although compared with 95% of the patrons not using opening cues in Park et al.'s study (2010), fewer patrons (55.5%) excluded opening cues, the results are still surprising.

## The Employment of Closing Rituals

In terms of closing rituals, Table 4 demonstrates the recurrent types and frequencies of various linguistic elements that were used by both the librarians and patrons. As shown in Table 4, the employment of closing cues indicates that the librarians provided rather sufficient closings to the patrons during online reference service. A high percentage (nearly 90%) of the librarians' responses included various closing elements. Signature using

sender's name is the most predominant type of closing (84.8%), followed by follow up invitation (32.2%), farewell/ending salutations (29.7%), and acknowledgements (7.2%).

Table 4

*The Employment of Closing Rituals of the Librarians and Patrons*

Email a Librarian Channel Categories of Closing	The Librarians		The Patrons	
	N	%	N	%
No closing elements	25	10.59	58	24.58
Acknowledgements	17	7.2	160	67.8
Farewell/ending salutations	70	29.7	45	19.1
Signature using sender's name	200	84.8	116	49.1
Follow up invitation/referral	76	32.2	18	7.6

The following transcript excerpt illustrates how the librarians close their responses.

*[...] I hope this information is helpful. Please let me know if you have more questions.*

*Best regards,*

*xxx*

In the above closing, the librarian used various politeness strategies to create solidarity and proximity with the patron. For example, she first conveyed her hope to have helped the patron by saying “*I hope this information is helpful.*” And she further attended to the patron's needs by inviting follow up from the patron if needed. The librarian did not officially wrap up the communication until she took farewell salutation and signed with her personal name.

In the cases of the patrons' quires, acknowledgements (67.8%) is the most frequently used closing cues, followed by signature using sender's name (49.1%), farewell/ending salutations (19.1%), and follow up invitation (7.6%). Although compared with Park et al.'s study (2010), where there were 77.5% queries which did not include any closing elements, the patrons had fewer instances (24.58%) which did not include closing elements.

### The Opening and Closing Rituals in “*Email a Subject Specialist*”

First of all, the patrons from both libraries were writing to unspecific recipients. If they were to write to a specific librarian, even if they had no previous engagement with the librarian, they would very likely use openings and closings. As shown in Tables 5 and 6, it was supported by evidence drawn from “*Ask a subject specialist*” and the follow up examples from the data of “*Email a librarian*”.

The following statistics show that all the patrons used openings and closing cues even though they had no previous engagement with the librarians, which seemed to be problematic. According to the argument presented by Park et al. (2010), there is a strong tendency to avoid greeting and addressing the other party in daily social interaction with an unknown addressee.

Reversely, it is not true that previous engagement between the librarians and patrons would give rise to the use of opening and closing rituals. Plenty of threads of email

exchanges showed that openings and closings may be dropped after a few rounds of exchanges on the same topic.

Table 5

*The Employment of Opening Rituals of Both the Librarians and Patrons in “Email a Subject Specialist”*

<i>Email a Specialist</i>	The Librarians		The Patrons	
	N	%	N	%
Categories of Opening				
No opening	3	10.34	0	0
Greeting expressions	24	82.8	24	82.8
Acknowledgements	2	6.9	0	0
Address forms/naming	26	89.7	27	93.1
Self-introduction	0	0	20	69

Table 6

*The Employment of Closings of Both the Librarians and Patrons in “Email a Subject Specialist”*

<i>Email a Specialist</i>	The Librarians		The Patrons	
	N	%	N	%
Categories of Closing				
No closing elements	0	0	0	0
Acknowledgements	1	3.5	26	89.7
Farewell/ending salutations	25	86.2	7	24.1
Signature using sender’s name	29	100	28	96.6
Follow up invitation/referral	3	10.3	6	20.7

A second possible reason why some patrons did not use openings and closings might be that the layout of the webpage may affect the patrons’ interpretation and expectation of whether and how the openings and closings should be used. It was found that before September 2009, the online reference service was named as “*Reference question*”, after September 2009, it was changed into “*Email a librarian*”. This would affect the patrons’ behavior in using openings and closings, as “*Reference question*” seemed to suggest the patrons should just go ahead and ask the question, indeed, there were many examples of bold queries with straight questions only. The pleasantries such as openings and closings seemed to be unnecessary in this situation.

In contrast, “*Email a librarian*” seemed to encourage the use of openings and closings, as by convention, when we compose an email, we usually start with address forms and close with farewell salutations and the sender’s signature. The instances of employment of openings and closings were calculated in emails sent before and after September 2009 separately. The results were reported in Tables 7 and 8.

As shown in Tables 7 and 8, the results indicate that there was a consistent increase in the employment of openings and closings after September, 2009 with the only exception in the use of self-introduction in opening rituals. This may be derived from the fact that the patrons’ name and affiliation with the university were already provided in the form before they submitted their request.



Table 7

*The Comparison of the Patrons' Employment of Openings before and after September 2009*

<i>Email a Librarian</i>	The Patrons before Sep. 2009		The Patrons after Sep. 2009	
	N	%	N	%
Categories of Opening				
No opening	70	56.91	62	54.87
Greeting expressions	40	32.52	72	63.72
Acknowledgements	0	0	5	4.4
Address forms/naming	17	13.8	93	82.3
Self-introduction	24	19.5	1	0.9

Table 8

*The Comparison of the Patrons' Employment of Closings before and after September 2009*

<i>Email a librarian</i>	The Patrons before Sep. 2009		The Patrons after Sep. 2009	
	N	%	N	%
Categories of Closing				
No closing elements	33	26.83	26	23.01
Acknowledgements	82	66.7	78	69.03
Farewell/ending salutations	23	18.7	22	19.5
Signature using sender's name	59	47.97	57	50.4
Follow up invitation/referral	5	4.1	13	11.5

Some students' perception might shed light on this issue. Some students did not perceive "*Email a librarian*" as emails, rather it was just an online request form. One undergraduate student whom the researcher interviewed made the following statement:

*I have no idea who I'm talking to, so I probably wouldn't include greetings, self-introductions, or salutations, but I would say thanks given that I am asking a question. For all I know, I could get an automated response that is from a computer and not a person, so it would be weird to "personalize" the email with information other than my question.*

It was also noted that on the online reference webpage right next to the reference question, there were such words as "Please be as specific as possible", which may discourage the patrons to use openings and closings.

A third possible reason might be that people who are not physically copresent become depersonalized and therefore are less inhibited by social norms that all communication should include openings and closings, as people might be less concerned about "face" when they are not face-to-face with others. This may explain why some librarians did not use openings and closings either.

Another possible reason why the librarians did not use openings and closings might be that they applied direct speech act to get down directly to the business so they could save more time to answer more patrons' questions. From the record of the email exchanges, it was found that some librarians' responses were immediately after the requests were

submitted. These responses had higher tendency of dropping openings and closings. In this sense, these emails were like synchronous near real-time live chat, so the openings and closings were not included.

Furthermore, some librarians interviewed stated that they usually match the formality of the patrons' emails. If the patrons use openings and closings, they would do too. If the patrons do not include any openings or closings, they would drop them as well.

Another noteworthy phenomenon in this study was that sometimes even when the patrons' questions seemed to be very bold and abrupt, the librarians responded very nicely and friendly. Here is an example of bold query and a nice reply.

*Looking for information on Dent Burroughs; known refs: W. W. Goldsborough, the Maryland Line in the Confederate Army (Baltimore, 1900)*

*Dear Mr. xxx,*

*I am assuming from your question that you are interested in university-related materials relating to Dent Burroughs. I am forwarding your request to our University Archivist for further assistance in your project. The web page for University Archives and Special Collections reference is located here: <http://www.library.georgetown.edu/dept/speccoll/> Please contact us if you have any further questions.*

*xxx*

Why would the librarian answer the questions so nicely? One librarian provided the following explanation.

*When the patrons write their request, they might be in a rush, or a bad mood or even in frustration, it is understandable. But as librarians respond, we do it in a professional way to provide courteous and well-rounded service. Librarians make patrons feel welcomed and comfortable in using both the library resources and library professionals.*

In addition to being professional, Goffman's (1976) works might shed light on this question. Goffman (1976) argued that when an individual gives out a positive image of himself to others, he will then try to keep that image and live up to that image. In social interaction, we want to make other people feel good and cared for, at the same time, we want to present ourselves well by being caring, polite, warm-hearted, and friendly.

## CONCLUSION

Park et al. (2010) reported that the majority of the IPL patrons did not use opening or closing cues. While IPL librarians used adequate greeting expressions in opening rituals, acknowledgements both in openings and closings, very high frequency of follow up invitations in closing rituals. Further, the IPL librarians used significantly more acknowledgements both in openings and closing rituals and more follow up invitation than the librarians as reported in this study. However, the librarians at this study employed significantly more address forms in openings and also more signature using sender's name.

It seems that the university's online reference service is more personal in this sense. Park et al. (2010) stated that previous studies have shown that personalized signatures using the librarian's first name or initials and addressing the patrons with their name may increase the librarians' approachability and thus facilitate patrons' repeat use of the virtual reference service. However, it has to be pointed out that there are more instances of the librarians at this study not using openings or closings than the IPL librarians; further, the patrons at this study used significantly more openings and closings than IPL patrons in each and every element.

The results reported in this study showed that there are cases where the librarians and patrons did not use opening or closing rituals, which violates the communication system constraints and ritual constraints proposed by Goffman (1976). In the course of information seeking and offering, the patrons are in the position of asking for help, thus they seem to be in lower social status. While the librarians are the knowers, helpers, and information providers, thus they seem to be in a higher social status. People in lower social status more often than not seem to take the initiative to build rapport with people in higher social status. In the case of reference service, it seems that the patrons should have taken the initiative to apply the linguistic politeness strategies such as using openings and closings to smooth the communication and pave the way for information seeking.

This study was limited in the following two ways. First of all, the quantity of the data was relatively small, especially the number of emails drawn from "Ask a subject specialist", which somewhat limits the interpretation and generalization of the findings of this study. Moreover, the gender, the cultural background, education and personality may all affect the way people employ openings and closings. This study did not consider the effects of these factors due to privacy issues and technological difficulty in collecting the data.

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