

## E-Mails as a Mode of Communication among Jordanian University Students: A Sociolinguistic Perspective \*

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### **Abstract**

*Electronic mediated communication is an increasingly popular form of communication among Jordanian university students. They are used for serving various communicative functions. This study was carried out with two main objectives in mind. Firstly, to determine the full extent of communication that is thereby achieved, and secondly, to see whether e-mail, as a new mode of communication, signifies the emergence of a new genre of writing. The corpus for this study comprises 210 e-mail messages collected from the files of 42 Jordanian university students of English. The study attempts to approach this phenomenon from a sociolinguistic point of view and hence, discusses the communicative functions of e-mail messages as used by a homogeneous group of students (i.e. students of English) in terms of language mastery and socio-cultural background. The data was analyzed in light of several views and theories on written and spoken discourse communication (e.g. Hymes, 1972; Blom and Gumperz, 1972; Swales, 1990, 199; Danet, 2002, 2003; Herring, 2002, 2001; Crystal, 2001, among others). The findings of this investigation showed that the texts are written in a mode different from that used in personal letter-writing, and that they do serve a considerable number of communicative functions. Moreover, the study revealed that the content of e-mail messages is governed by such sociological factors as sex and religion, and a number of other local communicative strategies as well. The major argument, therefore, developed in this study is that electronic mail messages have certain peculiarities of their own which are the by-product of using a new medium of communication. Based on the findings of this study, one may also argue for the emergence of a new genre of writing, though it is still in its initial stages.*

### **Introduction**

The remarkable explosion in communication technology has revolutionized the individual's everyday life and radically changed the face of interpersonal communications. Today, with the emergence of multiple electronic modalities of communication such as e-mails, voice mail, SMS, among others, language is expected to be affected extensively by the use of such electronic means of communication. To understand the significance of electronic mail as a mode of communication, and as a new cultural tool affecting intercultural communication, we need to know something about its use, structure, and function, as well as about its linguistic identity.

As is the case in many other means of written communication, e-mails have the function of conveying a particular message to their recipients. Bearing in mind the fact that e-mails as a personal mode of communication are primarily and essentially friendly social acts which aim at establishing and maintaining good relations between individuals, one might argue that any study of this type of communication would still be incomplete unless we examine this phenomenon from the sociolinguistic background of their writers.

Research on emails has initially attempted to lend itself to two basic questions: how to describe and explain the structural and functional features of e-mail messages and what type of socio-pragmatic inferences to draw from them (cf. Herring, 2002; Nishimura, 2003; Osborne, 1998; Ramsay *et al*, 1996; Yates, 1996; Collot and Belmore, 1996). At a later stage a huge number of studies have ap-

peared, most of which began to deal with new aspects relating to the use of e-mail. Reported and observed instances of this sort of studies are accumulating (e.g. Waldvogel, 2007; Duthler, 2006; Kankaanranta, 2005; Durham, 2003; Palfreyman and Al Khalil, 2003; Nishimura, 2003; Herring, 2002; Danet, 2002; Baron 2000; Gimenez, 2000).

Among the many valuable works which have appeared a few years ago is that of Danet and Herring (2003). This special issue presents a set of research papers based on computer-mediated communication on the multilingual Internet. It is devoted to languages other than English, and-in one instance-in a sociocultural context in which English is used as a non-native language, yet is used as a lingua franca. The issue demonstrates the relevance of these works for understanding and analyzing current issues and problems in the use of English by non-native speakers on various communicative electronic-media.

As far as the structural and linguistic features of emails are concerned, the works most relevant to our study are those of Gains (1999), Gimenez (2000), and Waldvogel, (2007). Gains (1999), who studied the text features of e-mail concludes that the commercial data examined do not contain new genres, but that the academic data may do so, and that more highly-targeted studies could reveal the text features of these genres. In like manner, Gimenez (2000) investigates whether the spoken nature of e-mail messages has already started to affect business written communication. His results reveal that electronically mediated communication is already affecting business written communication, showing a tendency towards a more flexible register. Waldvogel, (2007) has also examined the use and form of greetings and closings in the emails of two New Zealand workplaces: an educational organization and a manufacturing plant. The findings of her study suggest that workplace culture is a more important factor accounting for the frequency and form of greetings and closings than are relative status, social distance, and gender.

All in all, the following summary maps out the different perspectives on emails as a new mode of communication, and brings together latest thinking in the field. It also highlights some of the key questions concerning how this type of communication may affect language use by university students, among other users.

Emails are compact and brief, and unlike letter writing, they are done quickly, casually and in some cases carelessly.

2) Writers employ conversational strategies to communicate particular (personal or non-personal) messages different from those utilized in other modes of communication (see, for example, Waldvogel, 2007; Baron, 2003; Danet, 2001).

3) Emails display a certain type of language governed by age as a sociological factor, since the younger generation, 'the so called 'net generation'', is popularly assumed to be naturally media-literate and to be necessarily reinventing conventional linguistic and communication practices' (cf. Duthler, 2006; Thurlow, 2003; Danet, 2001; Palfreyman and Al Khalil, 2003; Nishimura, 2003).

4) The spoken nature of e-mail messages has already started to influence more serious type of written communication such as business and academic written communication (e.g. Valkenburg and Peter, 2007; Nishimura, 2003; Danet, 2002; Crystal, 2001; Gimenez, 2000; Gains, 1999)

5) As far as the pragmatic aspects are concerned some writers have begun to utilize pragmatic strategies to negotiate interpersonal relationships different from those used in other types of writing (e.g. Duthler, 2006; Durham, 2003)

The theoretical paradigm of this study is based on the ethnographic approach as developed by Dell Hymes (1972) and utilized successfully by many others (e.g. Blom and Gumperz, 1972; Wolfson, 1983). The aim of this approach is to provide better understanding of what constitutes communicative competence-which means not only knowing how to speak in a grammatically correct way, but also knowing how to talk in a socially appropriate way. The emphasis in this model is, therefore, on the complexity of a communicative event. This approach presupposes that talk is a complex activity. It is a qualitative description of ways in which people communicate to achieve their goals while respecting the socially acceptable norms of linguistic behavior.

Some linguists (e.g., Himmelmann, 2007; [Erickson, 1999](#); Baron, 1998, 2000; Gimenez, 2000) believe that no discussion of e-mail exchanges as a written mode of communication is complete without reference to the notion of genre. In this regard, Himmelmann (2007) contends that discussions of the systematics for communicative events often make reference to the notion of *genre* or *text type*, such as

*narrative, description, conversation*, etc. This assumption is based on the fact that “a genre is a patterning of communication created by a combination of the individual (cognitive), social, and technical forces implicit in a recurring communicative situation. A genre structures communication by creating shared expectations about the form and content of the interaction, thus easing the burden of production and interpretation” (Erickson, 1999, reported in Breure 2001:13).

Chandler (2000) assumes that conventional definitions of genres tend to be based on the notion that they constitute particular conventions of content (such as themes or settings) and/or form (including structure and style) which are shared by the texts which are regarded as belonging to them. Swales (1990) has built on this conception of genre by developing the notion of discourse communities. Members of a discourse community are those who participate in a genre: they have shared goals, they communicate with one another, and they use various participatory mechanisms to provide information and feedback (reported in Erickson, 1997).

In view of these points, the genre of a document can be defined here as a label which denotes a set of conventions in the way in which information is presented. These conventions cover both formatting and style of language used.

## The Study

### Objectives

This present study follows from a previous work on personal letter-writing as a mode of communication between an L2 writer and an L1 reader carried out by (Al-Khatib, 2001), extending its scope to a new communication mode. In his previous work, Al-Khatib examined 120 personal letters which were supposed to be written to hypothetical British English native speakers. That study has shown that as a non-nativized variety of English, the language used by the students exhibits certain peculiarities likely to be the result of contradiction between two different cultures, Arabic and English. The major argument developed in Al-Khatib's study is that some of the difficulties encountered by the students in writing English personal letters are due to ignorance on their part of the cultural norms governing the use of language. Moreover, it has been shown that, in addition to the primary function of communicating a particular message, the letters communicated a great deal of information about the writers, their style of writing, and the sociocultural norms of their society as well. Such information was found to be encoded in both the linguistic and structural features of the letters. Al-Khatib adds that in light of the account presented earlier, in his study, of the ways in which Jordanians can express their politeness, one may claim that Arab people in general and Jordanian people in particular, tend to utilize politeness strategies different from those used by the British. His findings, then, clearly illustrate the variability of presenting ideas and politeness due to contextual influences. In particular, they suggest that the content and the form of the letters culturally shaped by interactional elements that should be taken into consideration in the process of language teaching and learning.

Just like letter-writing (Al-Khatib, 2001), and the announcements placed in newspapers (see also Al-Khatib, 1997), e-mails have the function of conveying to the reader some information. For instance, they have the specific function of asking someone about his/her health, exchanging ideas about a particular issue, congratulating, complimenting, greeting etc. So, this study attempts to shed light on e-mail as a mode of communication among Jordanian university students from a sociolinguistic point of view. More specifically, it attempts to render a detailed characterization of this medium of communication in this particular context in relation to the sociocultural background of the e-mails' writers. Another objective of this study is to investigate whether e-mail messages, as a new mode of communication, signifies the emergence of a new literary genre. We hypothesize that e-mail messages are expected to show certain type of peculiarities which are not common to other types of communication like, for example, letter-writing.

### Hypotheses

Guided by both theoretical assumptions and previous empirical research in the field of written communication in general and electronic mediated communication in particular, this investigation will be carried out in light of the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Email messages are expected to show structural and linguistic features different from those used in letter-writing.

Hypothesis 2: The written messages are expected to be affected by the socio-cultural background of their writers.

Hypothesis 3: Sex is expected to be an important factor in determining the type of language to be used by the individual writer.

Hypothesis 4: Emails as a mode of communication is expected to demonstrate recognizable and new peculiarities of its own which differentiates it from other genres of writing.

## Data and method

The data for the subsequent analysis consists of 500 personal e-mail messages printed from the files of 50 students enrolled as a JUST (Jordan University of Science and Technology) English major. Each student was asked to provide us with the latest print-outs of their e-mail messages. The students provided us with a huge number of messages, some of which were written by students from other majors. From the outset, we intended to limit our study to the messages written only by students of English. Therefore, all those messages that were sent to the subjects by students from majors other than English were eliminated. Only ten messages were randomly selected from the file of each student. Thus, we were able to collect a total of 500 messages written-as messages and responses- by students of English.

It should also be mentioned here that we, from the very beginning, intended to use messages written by both male and female students so as to examine whether the subject's gender has any effect on the way the message was written. The subjects were of both sexes, with an age range of 18-22 years. The sample comprises 29 females and 21 males. So a close attention to the data shows that 290 messages were written by females and 210 by males.

The e-mail messages were collected during a period extending from February 2006 to October 2006. They are usually messages exchanged between friends and intimates. Thus, the data are produced by a homogeneous group of students in terms of cultural background and language mastery. That is to say, the data are written by students of English all of whom are of Jordanian origin. Given the fact that the data are produced by students who have had at least 8 years of instruction in English as a school subject, and who are a third or fourth year English major, most of the variables encountered could be due to the effect of this electronic medium of communication on the students' style of writing.

Structured interviews were also conducted with the subjects of this study for the purpose of getting more information on the way the messages are framed by the sociocultural background of the students. In so doing, we allowed the data, and the interpretations placed upon it by our informants, to lead us deeper into the study. All interviews began in the same open-ended way. We didn't want the interview to be determined by the questions we asked. As the series of interviews progressed, the probes increased in number and detail. Guided by the informants' responses, we developed a more in-depth perception of how this particular means of communication is used by Jordanian university students.

A quick look at the data shows that the great majority of the messages are written in English and some in Latinized Arabic or in both English and Latinized Arabic. One reason of why they are not written in Arabic is because there are some technical limitations that prohibit students from using Arabic scripts, namely there is no Arabic keyboard support (Arabic software standards) in Latin enabled computers. In Addition, students usually communicate with each other by opening their accounts on international sites such as the Hotmail or Yahoo Web-based e-mails which have no Arabic script. Therefore, the senders would not be able to enter their contributions in Arabic neither would the recipients be able to have the technical access to receive them. This remark is not far from what Palfreyman (2001) has also noticed in his data that technical constraints which do not support the use of Arabic characters have restricted the use of Arabic.

Since e-mail messages are typically exchanged between individuals and hence are basically private in nature, students were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the content of their messages. Moreover, they were assured that where examples of the data are given in the article, for reasons of anonymity, their names would not be placed plainly on the texts rather they would be replaced by symbols like X, Y, Z and so on.

Finally, it should also be noted here that unless the written texts hinder intelligibility, they will be presented to the readers of this paper exactly as written by the subjects.



## Data Analysis

The analysis upon which the following discussion is based was carried out with three important points in mind: first, to examine the structural and linguistic components of e-mail messages; second, to highlight the communicative functions they attempt to serve; and third, to shed some light on how such means of communication can be affected by the socio-cultural background of students.

### *Structural features of email messages*

By structural features we mean all those elements which form the structure of an e-mail message, such as its length, appearance, layout, orthographic conventions, graphics, etc. Although personal e-mail messages have several features in common with personal letter-writing (see Al-Khatib 2001), which belong to the same family of texts, they differ in a considerable number of other features. As for the structural features of email messages, we have isolated two types of features: obligatory and optional. The obligatory are those features that should be included in the text such as the heading, short introduction, substance of the message, conclusion of good wishes and the sender's name; and the optional, on the other hand, are those that are left to personal choice. An examination of both types of texts shows that the difference between letter-writing and email messages is mainly due to the use of computer as an electronic means of communication.

As for the obligatory components, it has been observed that these elements are prevalent 100% of the time in all of the collected messages. The heading is usually a very short phrase of the form 'Dear X', 'Hi X', or 'Hello X.' Our analysis of the data shows that the last two expressions "*Hi X* and *Hello X*" are much more prevalent in the texts than "*Dear X*". That is, they are used 94% of the time. The introduction is of the form "how are you? How is the family? How are your exams? The substance of the letter depends on the type of topic being discussed. Some messages start with a reference to the most recent contact with the other person. Some others end with a reference to the next contact with the other person. *Love* is a suitable ending for an intimate friend of either sex. The data analysis shows that the heading (i.e. *Dear* or *Beloved* used as expressions of endearment), the addressee's name, the topic being discussed, and the concluding statement are standard features of the e-mails. But it has been noticed that date of e-mail is not significant, therefore a very few of the e-mail messages have included this feature.

As for the optional features, it has been observed that only 22% of the messages include some decorative devices, and most of such devices are happy emoticons. A careful examination of the data shows that the great majority of the used happy emoticons are smilies of different types. It has also been noticed that the use of such devices is conditioned by the sex of the writer. That is to say, we found out that female students tend to employ more decorative devices than their male counterparts, i.e. 91% of the employed emoticons were used by females. Among the many emoticons used by the students are party, love, smoking, sleep, and animal emoticons. It has also been observed that some parts of the messages are bold-faced. Bold-facing, though it is an optional device, appears to have been used intentionally by some of the students. They are used for emphasizing a particular point. This fact was clearly evident in the type of words being boldfaced in the following two examples: "...don't u know I **love** u too **much**" and "please **don't forget** to bring me the phonetics book **tomorrow**." In these two examples the writers attempt to communicate two strong messages of love and reminding respectively by emphasizing the concerned expressions. We counted more than 64 cases of such technique (emphasizing) in the data. Some of the subjects have also reported that they employ boldfacing for making their texts easier to read.

Another optional feature of the e-mail messages is the message length. A close examination of the data shows that the length of the message depends greatly upon the type of topic being discussed. For instance, we noticed that an e-mail sent to an intended recipient to explain a situation is longer in length than a congratulatory message, and a reminder is shorter in length than a congratulatory e-mail. When we examined a "selected sample data" (i.e. 30 e-mail messages selected randomly from the corpus of messages) we observed that the average length of a message of is 100-120 words.

### *Linguistic features of e-mail messages*

Linguistic features of e-mail messages will be discussed under three main headings: (1) Register, (2) Typological conventions, and (3) Code-switching.

## Register

It was planned to see whether the sex of the individual writer had an effect on the linguistic features of the messages. In general, the stylistic register employed by both sex groups is characterized as being informal. Formality here was measured in terms of three main factors: i) openings and closings (Gains 1999), ii) paralinguistic cues (Murray 1988), and iii) simplifications of language (Murray 1988). The great majority of the writers (i.e. 98%) appear to have adopted some of the discourse features of conversation and used these into their written messages. To illustrate consider the following examples in which the response can appear to be an extended-time second pair-part response to a first-pair part question:

- (1) whats up??? well I am fine like you, how are u? how is the family?
- (2) as for health don't worry , i am ok and I hope you are ok too.
- (3) I never forget u but I was very busy with the exams during the last few weeks.

Similar observations were also reported by Brenda Danet (2002:3) who studied her own correspondence. She noticed that her data contained not merely a variant of the question "How are you?."--- "How are ya doin?", but, more crucially, "I'm feeling spiffy too." As if she (the addressee) had already asked the reciprocal question. Based on the results of her study, Danet concluded that "although text-based online communication is written, it partially resembles oral communication in a variety of aspects."

Word selection was also found to be another technique by which writers attempt to make their writing sound and look more like oral language. The utterances in (4) and (5) below illustrate this phenomenon:

- (4) ...X and Y r kissing u and all the time they r laughing just the children make troubles but as u know them bejaneno (i.e. they are so sweet).
- (5) how do u do in your life there? we miss u kteer (i.e., too much) ya hilwa (i.e., you beautiful) and wish 2 c u soon habibti (i.e. love).

These results demonstrate that writers may make their writing sound like unplanned talk. Unplanned talk usually, according to Hatch (1992: 246), takes place by employing short clauses and that "temporally ordered clauses are frequently connected with the conjunction 'and'.

Another technique by which writers attempt to sound less formal in their messages is the adoption of simple straightforward syntactic structures. 96% of the writers show preference for co-coordinated rather than subordinated ideas. The same proportion of students also show liking for short sentences over long elaborate ones. For illustration, consider the utterances in (6) below.

- (6) well me. Im ok I guess, and everybody here is ok too. Well take care, and I hope I'll hear from u soon. By the way I'll be sending u more emails. But it wouldn't be late like before. so u wont get without my emails.

Furthermore, we noticed that one of the obvious differences between language in the data under consideration and language used in personal letter-writing ( see Al-Khatib 2001) is the frequent use of the form "*please*" + *a verb* + *an object* to express requests (e.g. please+ send me+ your book soon) (153 instances). This form seems to be preferred by e-mail writers in the corpus compared to the form "It would be appreciated if you could send me your ....."(15 instances) most often used in personal written communication. Perhaps the frequent use of the former, ("please" + a verb + an object) is due to the fact that it is more direct and concise for the e-mail system.

## Typological conventions

Data analysis has revealed that one of the most prominent linguistic features of e-mail messages is the heavy use of numerals in romanized Arabic by the writers. A close attention to the data shows that numerals were used 87% of the time of the total number of cases in which a sound can be replaced by a numeral. We also noted that the sex of the subject is of no significant effect in the process, namely this method was utilized in almost equal proportions by both sex groups (42% and 45% by male and

female students respectively). The following table (1) lists multiple examples of these numerals, together with their Arabic equivalents.

**Table 1: A list of the numerals as used in romanized Arabic along with their Arabic equavelants (letters)**

Numeral	Letter	Example
7	ح	<i>7ilwe</i> (beautiful)
7'	خ	<i>7'ali</i> (my uncle)
3	ع	<i>3aali</i> (high)
3'	غ	<i>3'ali</i> (expensive)
9	ص	<i>el9aba7</i> (morning)
9'	ض	<i>9'aa3</i> (lost)
6	ط	<i>6abi3</i> (stamp)
2	ء	<i>bi2uul</i> (he says)

Table 1 shows how these numerals resemble their Arabic equivalents (Arabic Alphabits) in graphic shape. It should be mentioned here that such examples show a transliteration of orthography, rather than a transcription of pronunciation, that is, they are used by students because they resemble Arabic characters in graphic shape. For instance, the proper noun /xalid/ can be represented as 'khalid' according to the Common Latinized Arabic (CLA), but e-mail writers tend to make their Latinization sounds more like Arabic by representing it as *7'alid* than *khalid*. Many other such cases were also observed by Palfreyman and Al Khalil (2003), and Warschauer et al (2002).

Another remarkable observation made by the study is the heavy use of non-standard orthographic forms such as shortenings, contractions, G clippings, acronyms, and less capitalization. By shortening we mean the way the writer uses a form of speech in which he/she shortens words and replaces the word with only one letter, in an effort to save time and effort; and by contractions we mean the way some writers tend to form a new short word from a long one, two or more individual words. For more clarification, the examples below illustrate this phenomenon:

**Shortenings:** *r* 'are', *u* 'you'.

**Contractions:** *wk* 'week', *msg* 'message', *b. day* 'birthday', *2nite* 'tonight'.

**G clippings:** *goin* 'going', *thinkin* 'thinking', *eatin* 'eating', *'writin*, *'drawin*.

After carefully scrutinizing the data, we found that 142 uses of shortenings, 127 of contractions, and 102 of G clippings of the total number of words were employed by the students. This is illustrated in the following example taken from a lengthy message written by a female student:

(7) hiii, how r u? n how is ur studyin? hope that everything is doin well with u....about me i'm fine comin back 2 jordan....X is fine he is sendin u his regards but recently he is busy that's y he isn't sending u e-mails. Y o naya r kissing u n all the time they r lookin 2 c u soon....as u know yestr was Zuzo's b. day, we celebrated that. Thank u for your wishes.

The analysis performed with the responses collected from the students also revealed that the great majority of the respondents (92%) showed enthusiasm towards using such devices. This is because, according to some of them, these devices do facilitate the process of communication on this particular medium. A male respondent, for example, says "we like them because they are more direct and concise for the system. They save the user's time and effort."

Capitalization, however, was found to be employed only for emphasis purposes. 37% of the respondents have reported that capitalization aid effective communication among the net users only in certain cases. A female student, for instance, has clarified to us that "sarcasm, for example, can be achieved through written language only by using capitalization." She added "sarcasm in an utterance like "Well isn't THAT just brilliant" can be achieved through capitalizing the word *that*."

Reduplication of sounds is also a popular practice among the students. By reduplication we mean a process by which one sound of a word is repeated. An examination of the data shows that this technique has been employed by the respondents in more than 156 e-mail messages. It is employed, as some of the respondents have put it, to represent some attitudinal effect. Such technique was found to be used most often by the subjects upon greeting or complimenting each another. In the data we counted more than 198 instances of sound reduplication. Similar observation was cited by Palfreyman and Al Khalil (2003) who noticed that vowels are reduplicated by the subjects for the purpose of emphasizing or expressing a particular point. The process of reduplication in our case also appears to be functional. That is, it is used for conveying a particular message of love and good feeling. Some of the users are found to employ reduplication of sounds online as if conversing offline, and interact appropriately with their fellow participants.

The utterances in (8, 9, and 10) below illustrate this phenomenon:

(8) Dear X....

Thaaaaaanks a lot for your efforts and I wiiiiiiiish you more success  
 smaaaaaaaaart man.

(9) hi X...

Congratulaaaaation! For the new kid who is a gift from ALLah. Also I would  
 like to take this opportunity to compliment you and everybody of your family on  
 your greaaaat successssssss.

(10) Hello Dear X!

I am fine. I missssss you tooooo much. How r u ya hilwaaaaa (i.e. you beautiful  
 lady). Yesterday I met you r looooooovely brother who told me about your  
 coming back.

In these three excerpts the writers attempt to exploit this strategy efficiently so as to emphasize their positive feelings toward their addressees, and consequently heighten the degree of solidarity with them. Respondents were asked about their reaction to the use of such technique. The most common reaction was that they were happy with it. 83% of them have reported that they use it most often. A male respondent has said "by reduplicating some words we can amplify our feelings toward each other. Sometimes we use it to tell the addressee how much the thing being referred to is important to us."

Relying on the above observations, and due to the heavy use of such forms in our data, one may argue that electronic discourse is developing and becoming a new form of communication in its own right. Such form of communication is characterized by having special structural and linguistic features which typify it as a new discourse type used to communicate certain sociolinguistic messages. Commenting on this issue, Thurlow (2003: 22) remarks that:

In their text-messages, young people write it as if saying it to establish a more informal register which in turn helps to do the kind of small-talk and solidarity bonding which is desired. The language they use is therefore not only intelligible but also appropriate to the overall communicative function.

### Code-switching

Appel and Muysken (1987:119-121) sum up six major functions served by code switching: the "referential" function when it involves all topic-related switching such as "lack of facility" or "lack of knowledge" in one language when talking about a particular topic, the "Directive" function when it includes all participant-related switching such as including or excluding someone from a conversation, the "Expressive" function emphasizes a mixed identity by using two languages in the same conversation, the "Phatic" or "Metaphorical" function "to indicate a change in tone of the conversation", the "Metalinguistic" function e.g., to impress other participants with a show of linguistic skills and the "Poetic" function involving switched puns and jokes. Insofar as electronic-mediated communication is concerned, Palfreyman and Al Khalil (2005) indicate that there is a fair amount of code switching in their data. This switching of varieties, according to Palfreyman and Al Khalil, correlates with different functions and topics, with Arabic being used for more formulaic phrases such as greeting, and English for topics such as university courses.



Evidence from the present study also seems to support this allegation. It has been observed that a considerable number of e-mail messages like those shown in example 4 and 5 above, contain a large number of instances of code-switching to romanized Arabic. A case in point is the use of such examples as *bejaneno* (they make me mad-because they are so beautiful), *kter* (much), *ya hilwa* (you're beautiful), and *habibti* (love). Moreover, data analysis reveals that this process appears to be structured and functional. The corpus shows that "approximately" 10% of participants use mainly romanized Arabic script in their messages, 55% Arabic and English, and 35% only English. In asking the respondents about why they switch between English- as a matrix language- and Arabic, 95% of them reported that they do that so as to serve certain communicative and technical functions. Among these mentioned by them are: first, to introduce a new concept into the text as they have no purely English equivalent to that particular item; secondly, to emphasize or express a particular message of politeness (i.e. expressing their feelings or representing attitudinal effect); and thirdly, to serve the purpose of speeding up typing. These results indicate that the participants appear to be quite aware of the importance of switching between the two languages, and at what points to do that in their text messages as well. Similar results were also arrived at by Kung (2004) who noticed that a considerable number of code-switching cases took place from English to Chinese when Chinese net users wanted to use Chinese sayings. Likewise, Palfreyman and Al Khalil (2003) spoke of several cases of code-switching and code-mixing between English and Arabic when they observed that Arabic is used by students for formulaic phrases and English for talking about courses and other related matters at university.

Based on these results one may claim that email messages as written by Jordanian university students have special type of structural and textual features. The style of writing used in this particular type of communication is generally informal, and that the language stripped down and abbreviated. So it is highly likely that a new standardized type of genre is emerging. And further, that the medium is fostering this emergent genre, across different languages and cultures.

## The effect of the students' socio-cultural background on their text messages

In this section, we shall discuss how a number of socio-cultural factors such as sex, religion, and other local communication strategies affect the students' e-mail messages.

### Sex

In Arab society the gender of the addressee in relation to the addresser may provide information about the type of language being used in terms of form and content (Al-Khatib, 2001). Al-Khatib has also reported that segregation of sexes is one of the main features that characterize Arab society. Despite the fact that the present study data are collected from students (males and females) who are enrolled in co-educational institutions, it seems that they are still aware of the cultural norms of their society which impose a great deal of restrictions on a man-woman relationship. The two gender groups do not exist in isolation from one another, but instead interact in a number of subtle ways. This is due to the fact that males and females in Jordanian society can be seen as members of two distinct subcultures, each of which is characterized by radically different kinds of behavior (see Al-Khatib, 2003).

A close examination of the data shows that 89% of the letters written by females are addressed to females, and 95% of those written by males are addressed to males. Thus, these results indicate that the writers appear to be still aware of the cultural norms of their society, which impose, as said previously, some restrictions on mixed gender relationships, e.g., prohibiting a lady from corresponding with strangers. Therefore, each student tended to choose messages from those addressed to recipients of the same sex group.

It has also been observed that gender of the writer has still a role to play in topic choice. In most cases female students tend to talk about feelings, family, relationships, friends, and so on. Much evidence suggests that they enjoy talking, but also want to give and take of talk. This fact is clearly manifested in the many open-ended questions being included in their messages. As conversing is an important part of most female's lives, one can easily notice that female students often write to each other here to keep up to date. By contrast, it has been noticed that male students rarely, if ever, write about their feelings or inner thoughts. Rather, they discuss some practical matters, like their latest computer update, computer games, how to be prepared well for the next exam, or even sports. A number of the male students also tended to exchange jokes and anecdotes. In the corpus of messag-

es exchanged between males and females, we noticed that males try hard to carry on witty, fun, and pleasant conversations. However, they spend a considerable amount of time talking about themselves, their achievements or talk sporadically about their own problems or the difficulties being encountered in digesting a particular topic. In this regard, Rubin (1984:265) argues that "the needs, goals, attitudes, habits and values of the individuals involved represent another source of influence on communication within relationships." In like manner, Nystrand (1986:48, cited in Al-Khatib 2001) claims that "the shape and conduct of discourse is determined not only by what the speaker or writer has to say or complete but also by joint expectations of the conversants that they should understand one another."

Holmes (1992) also contends that "language can convey objective information of referential kind; and it can also express how someone is feeling". The two sex groups were found to be differentiated from one another in their use of certain type of address norms. Pet names were used by Jordanian university students, though they are employed by female students, e.g., *dandouna*, *rashrousha*) much more often than their male counterparts. However, it has been noticed that male students tend to use certain type of pet name of those which express a kind of toughness. For instance, *?abush shabab* "the chief of youths" is one strategy through which some of the male writers attempt to claim common ground with their male addressee. By *pet name* we mean that name usually given to a person by the family members or his/her peer group as a sign of love or friendliness. In particular, they are expressions (i.e. markers of politeness and status) which Jordanian female or male students use to convey kind feelings toward the addressee and, hence, strengthen solidarity (Al-Khatib, 2003). A close examination of the data shows that 95% of the e-mails written by females include pet names, whereas only 19% of those written by males contain such names. The difference here could be accounted for in terms of the fact that women, in general, are more polite in their speech than males (see Holmes 1992), and such politeness emanates from the fact that they are more status-conscious than men. This finding indicates that the process is almost a feminine one. This practice is illustrated in the following examples:

- (11) Hi *rashrousha* (a pet name of a female student called Rasha), how r u *habubti* (love) I miss u all so much in amman.
- (12) salam ya *hilwa* (Hi beautiful girl), I finally got your e-mail and was happy to hear your good news. I am glad to see u keeping yourself busy.
- (13) salam ya *a hla ?elbanat* (Hi the most beautiful girl).. How r u *habibti?* (love) and how is everybody with you?
- (14) *habibti samsuma* (A pet name of a girl called Samia or Sumaya), I am fine and misssssssss uuuuuuuuuu v much.
- (15) hi man.....how r u *?abu shabab?* (Chief of youths) shta?nalik waLLa (we are missing you by God) .... I mean it.

As pet names so common in verbal interaction and personal e-mail messages and quite rare in personal letters (see Al-Khatib 2001), indicate the informality of style being used in writing e-mails, and provide further evidence of the stylistic similarities between electronic mail on one hand, and spoken discourse on the other.

### Religion

In Jordanian society, religious norms influence social interaction in most forms of spoken or written discourse. They are of great importance in accounting for the way people deal with each other. Sometimes they can be used as criteria by which people judge their behavior, rights, and obligations. A specific type of greeting which occurs initially in letter-writing is, for example, the Moslem salutation "*?asalamu?alykum*" (Peace be with you). In a previous study on letter-writing Al-Khatib (2001) found that eight letters written by both males and females were headed with the invocation "in the name of God, the Beneficent, and the Merciful". Also he observed that "*?inshalla*" (God willing) was another expression of wish, which was found to be employed more than 20 times by letter-writers.

A close examination of the data here showed that no single e-mail was found to be headed by this invocation (i.e. In the name of God...). This finding indicates that most of the writers are quite aware of the fact that e-mails are less formal in nature than letter-writing. Therefore most of them appear to have avoided using such expression in their e-mails. However, we have noticed that the Islamic greeting (*?asalamu ?alykum*) has occurred initially in only 25 emails (i.e. 12% of the collected e-mails). But

It has also been observed that this expression was employed 102 times by the students, and some of them have used it more than one time in one text as shown in excerpt (16) below:

(16) hi habibti X

how are u? and how is ur day? I am fine... so its good to hear that u are ok, I hope your family will go to Kuwait safely inshallah. Salmi Zaleihum (please give them my best regards), and I hope they will enjoy their vacation inshalla. by the way, tell Y that we misssssssssed her veryyyyyy much. After that e-mail I am going to write you in Arabic inshalla....

Notice here the different positions in the text in which this expression of hope has taken place. 'To Kuwait safely', 'enjoy their vacation', and 'write you in Arabic' all of which are believed to happen only by God willing. It is worth mentioning here that the use of *?inshallah* is taken from the Arab and Islamic tradition, whereby the writer utilizes such expression wherever he/she wishes something good to happen in the future.

Moreover, it has been observed that some of the e-mails are used as a means of communicating a religious message of love and good wishes on certain social occasions. Among the many religious expressions which were utilized by the writers on such occasions are: *masha?allah*, *?allah yiħmiik*, *?allah maʿak* all of which mean 'God bless you'; also '*you come back biħfth ?ilaah*' 'with the protection of God'; and '*biSalatu ʿalainabi*' 'God bless the Prophet Mohammad' (eulogy after the name of the Prophet Mohammad, usually cited by Moslem people to protect from envy).

#### *Communal stereotype attributes*

Social life in the Arab world in general, and in Jordan in particular, has always centered around the family and the attitude of the individual toward the family. The most fundamental element that brings Jordanians together is the family. Barkat (2005) has described the Arab family as the basic unit of socio-economic strength in society and has seniority over all economic, social, and political matters of society. This is because Arab culture is shaped by a religiously-inspired value system that emphasizes strict morality and strong familial and communal bonds.

With this image of Jordanian society in mind, we can analyze how familial relationships shape all aspects of the daily communications of Jordanians. And how such relationships are manifested in the way Jordanian people communicate with each other. The most common forms that can be utilized by a Jordanian e-mail message-writer are to ask about oneself, family, parents, brothers, sisters and health. Put differently, the addressee might be asked about his/her family (i.e. How the children and family are), and his/her parents' health (i.e. How your mother/father's health is). Such questions are usually followed by a number of hopes and wishes like "I hope they are fine", or "the family is fine" or "they are in good health". Hence, a substantial amount of space is devoted in the beginning of their e-mails to asking about the family members' health and how things are going. This could be a reflection of the verbal behavior of Jordanian people in which friends spend a considerable amount of time asking such personal questions upon meeting each other.

Family and familial relationships were found to be employed in 89 of the collected e-mails (i.e. 42%). To illustrate, let us have a look at the three introductory excerpts in examples (17), (18), and (19) below, which are taken from three different e-mails.

(17) how are you....X...? how is ur family? how are your parents? i wish  
 that you and your family r in good health.

(18) I want to begin by askin about ur health and study, and about ur  
 brother x's health.

(19) first of all, i'd like to ask you about yourself, about your parents, and  
 about whether they are pleased with u.

Notice how the writers of these three excerpts began their messages by asking their friends about different members of their families. Also, in example 19 notice how the writer (a female student) asks the addressee about whether or not they are pleased with her. This last question represents one as-

pect of the verbal behavior of Jordanian people in which friends spend some time asking about each others' parents and whether they are faithful and devoted to them. Such practice is Islamic in nature. Islam has always called for pleasing parents and for being faithful to them. Jordanian people place a great deal of importance on pleasing their parents. Pleasing parents may entail pleasing God. So before we proceed to perform a particular action most people tend to recite the invocation "*yariDa aLLah wariDa ?alwalidayn*" (May God and parents be pleased with someone). By so doing, they believe that their efforts may be of product.

Our findings clearly indicate that these messages are deeply affected by the sociocultural background of their writers, and that this article makes the case for studying how Jordanian university students navigate across contexts of socialization and the virtual environments of the Internet to articulate new ways of communicating in English as a second language.

## Discussion

Now that we have seen how the students' e-mail messages are written and how such messages are colored by their sociocultural background, the questions that still need to be addressed here are: 1) What are the main differences between email and conventional letter-writing; 2) What effect electronic communication has left on writing in general and writing personal messages in particular?; 3) whether this type of written communication contains any recognizable and new genre; and 4) what implications and inferences can be drawn from the results of this study for English language teaching.

Electronic communication, in general, places new demands on language that leads to interesting variations in written language use (Biesenbach-Lucas & Wiesenforth, 2001). This is because, as Ferris (2002) put it, computers re-introduced many oral characteristics into electronic writing. For instance, computer-mediated communication reintroduced the qualities of temporal immediacy, phatic communion, the use of formulaic devices, presence of extra textual content, and development of community that had been characteristics of oral communication. Most of previous works which dealt with this issue have argued for the fact that this type of writing is marked by features of both informal speech and formal writing (see Danet 2002, 2003). Abdullah (2003:1), for example, believes that word processing and e-publishing have brought about interesting developments in the way writers write. He adds that, in general, the malleable nature of electronic text has made the physical process of composing more 'elastic' in that writers are quicker to commit thought to writing and to reorganize content because it is simple to make changes on the electronic screen (see also Leibowitz (1999).

Evidence from the present study also seems to support the assertion that email as one type of electronic communication is characterized by having some structural and linguistic features of its own. Emails are compact and brief, and unlike letter writing, they, as said earlier, are done quickly, casually and in some cases carelessly. Moreover, all evidence suggests that the subjects of this study tend to employ conversational strategies to communicate particular messages different from those used in letter-writing. We noticed that email styles in general are less formal and more reader-oriented than those employed in letter-writing. Also, we observed that although both types of writing are dominated by interpersonal relations, the written letters are more factual. That is to say, they tend to reflect the influence of culture-specific factors (e.g. communal stereotypical attributes and the local communicative strategies) in a better way than email messages. For this reason personal email messages can be seen as less involved and less narrative than their written counterparts. Most of the interviewed students (96% of them) have reported that they prefer to communicate via emails because they represent a quick way to connect with others with short simple language that informally addressed. They also added that they prefer email because often an email leaves many elements of the hand written letter. A female subject, for example, has said "in email messages the constraints of time, precision, and space are all removed." They also think that electronic communication is allowing immediacy in communication, and eliminating distance between users. They, as some of them put it, find themselves uninhibited by the constraints of language, i.e. a correct language use, a characteristic often associated with conventional letter-writing. This same idea was also highlighted by Ferris (2002: 7) who believes that "electronic writing is characterized by the use of oral conventions over traditional conventions, of argument over exposition, and of group thinking over individual thinking.

Now having said all that, we still have to know 'whether or not the collected set of e-mails represents any distinctive new genre of writing', in most of the previous works on electronic-mediated communication it has been noted that the examined e-mail messages do have some features of their own.



Louhala-Salminen (1996:19), for example, has suggested that "business letters" and "business faxes" as representing "over-arching pre-genres under which more specific genres...operate." And this may hold true of the concept of "business e-mails" (cited in Gains 1999:98). Similarly, Gains (1999:98) reached the conclusion that the commercial data examined does not contain new genres, whereas the academic data may do.

Swales (1999) sees genres as types of spoken and written discourse recognized by a particular discourse community, and each genre has typical features. Some may be linguistic, some paralinguistic, and some contextual and pragmatic. Swales believes genres may overlap with each other. He (1990) also adds that members of a discourse community are those who participate in a genre: they have shared goals, they communicate with one another, and they use various participatory mechanisms to provide information and feedback. Taking this definition as a criterion, and based on the analysis of the e-mail messages which was carried out earlier, and which showed that personal e-mail messages have certain structural conventions as well as certain linguistic features of their own (i.e. different from those used in personal letter-writing), and as the company in question form a group which can be described as a discourse community, one might claim that this type of written communication does contain recognizable and new genre of its own, though it is still in the making and response to question (1) above.

Having addressed questions the first three questions, the question which still remains without answer is 'what implications and inferences can be drawn from the results of this study for teaching English as a foreign language?' Grabe and Kaplan (1996:208) assume that "The extent of shared background will influence the writing to a considerable degree; that is, readers with a high degree of shared background knowledge are likely to influence the writing in particular ways." The findings of this study seem to sit well with this assertion. They suggest that the relationship between the addresser and the addressee, the 'shared knowledge' between them as well as the electronic medium used determine not only the style of writing but also the type of language being used on that particular medium of communication. So from the data available in this article, it has been noticed that familiarity to the foreign language may be facilitated, if not accelerated, by developing a familiarity to the cultural norms that govern the use of that language.

Since this study has shown that language use is greatly affected by the sociocultural background of the writers, the following points suggested by Stiles (2000) have to be taken into consideration by course designers as well as teachers of written communication: First, learning is a social process and development is linked to the specific culture in which learning activities are shared. Second, learning activities need to be "authentic"-normal to the culture in question and involve its tools and artifacts. Third, learning is situated in the dual contexts of culture and learning environment and that learning involves the interaction of learners and experts within them.

## Conclusion

This study counts as a preliminary attempt to examine the nature and structural features of e-mails in this particular milieu. The analysis has shown that the e-mails are predominantly legitimate offsprings of the interaction between language, culture and communicating technologies. Expanding the scope of study from text features to the text content not only permits us to reveal a precise and subtle assessment of the text product's characteristics but also allows us to put forward a number of suggestions as to why certain type of language is preferred much more often than other. The textual analysis we presented in this paper provides a considerable amount of information on the structural features of the e-mail messages as well as the socio-pragmatic constraints governing their use.

Moreover, it has been shown that, in addition to the primary function of communicating a particular message, the messages communicated a great deal of information about the writers, their style of writing, and the sociocultural norms of their society as well. Such information was found to be encoded in both the linguistic and structural features of the written messages. The above findings, then, clearly show that the content and form of the email messages are culturally shaped by interactional elements and that should be taken into consideration in the process of language teaching and learning.

From the findings of this study it has been observed that e-mail messages follow "rules" for style and conventions that differ from the norms for handwritten letters. Among the several discourse features which differentiate e-mail messages from letter-writing are opening salutation, opening statement, closing statement and closing salutation, although they are not obligatory features for such a commu-



nication. All evidence suggests that this type of written communication does contain recognizable and new peculiarities of its own which differentiate it from other genres of writing.

## Notes

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