Stefania Consonni / Larissa D'Angelo / Patrizia Anesa (eds.)

Digital Communication and Metadiscourse

Changing Perspectives in Academic Genres

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PART 2. SCREEN-READY: DIGITAL GENRES

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Creating a trusting student-professor relationship: Engagement markers in academic e-mail communication

Abstract

E-mails present an interpersonal computer-mediated communication and a most-widely used form of digital communication. In the formal academic setting, digital interaction between students and professors, although used on daily bases, frequently requires students to deliver higher pragmatic competence and language awareness to reflect power asymmetry. However, it also provides an opportunity for lowering the power distance settings, and for the utilization of engagement markers in order to establish and maintain a more accommodating and beneficent environment. As the markers involving the reader into the context, engagement markers explicitly build the relationship between the students and their professors. Using both qualitative and quantitative analysis, the paper will demonstrate how the use of engagement markers as a distinct metadiscourse category in student-professor e-mail communication facilitates interaction and establishes a more trusting relationship. Using the corpus of student e-mails to professors, in both Serbian and English, the analysis will focus on the lexical elements (second person pronouns, imperatives, question forms, etc.) that explicitly address professor as the participant in the e-mail content, thus creating a more amiable context and a low power distance setting. The results will demonstrate the differences in the use of engagement markers in English with the distinct formal communication and in Serbian with less lexical formal engagement markers. Finally, the results will reveal the distinctive use of metadiscourse markers in

digital environment and the informal tendencies that are gradually prevailing over the formal communication.

1. Introduction

E-mails present a most-widely used form of interpersonal computer-mediated communication between students and university professors (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Alcón 2013b). In the formal academic setting, digital interaction between students and professors requires students to deliver higher pragmatic competence and language awareness to reflect power asymmetry (Spencer-Oatey 1997; Hofstede 2001). However, it also provides an opportunity for lowering the power distance settings, and for the utilization of engagement markers in order to establish and maintain a more accommodating and beneficent environment.

Faculty staff may express their concern about the frequency of e-mails, their content and their linguistic forms. Complaints are related to unreasonable requests, copying notes from classes, inappropriate openings and closings, spelling and grammar mistakes (Kočović 2015), or impolite tone (Hardford/Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Glater 2006). Students, on the other hand, may prefer e-mails due to spatial and "a healthy" distance (Glater 2006: 3), possibility of directness (Cameron 2003), absence of evident social context (Baron 1984), or simply preference for modern technology (Baron 1984; Halliday 1990). Biesenbach-Lucas (2006) suggests that it is possible that e-mails have not been taught properly, and thus students are simply uncertain about e-mail etiquette. Therefore, there is an obvious need for students to be provided with appropriate models, a feedback on the written e-mails, prior to being involved in academic communication with their professors. Likewise, they may be introduced to metadiscourse markers as a valuable linguistic tool in the digital dialogue.

As the markers involving the reader into the context, engagement markers explicitly build the relationship between the students and their professors. Using both qualitative and quantitative analysis, the paper

will demonstrate how the use of engagement markers as a distinct metadiscourse category in student-professor e-mail communication facilitates interaction and establishes a more trusting relationship. Using the corpus of student e-mails to professors, in both Serbian and English, the analysis will focus on the lexical elements (second person pronouns, imperatives, question forms, etc.) that explicitly address professors as the participants in the e-mail content, thus creating a more amiable context and a low power distance setting.

2. Theoretical background

E-mails are considered a digital form of communication, combining elements of both written and oral communicative styles, in order to achieve a certain pragmatic function (Bou-Franch 2011). Though a form that is not frequently used nowadays, it can still be related to real-life situations between speakers of different social ranks writing in different situations (e.g., as workplace request e-mails, see Ho 2018), including the computer communication between students and their professors (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2012; Alcón 2013a). Alpay (2005: 7) emphasizes that e-mail writing provides a number of benefits: logistical convenience, especially if participants are based in disparate locations; time and space to express all ideas and opinions in a convenient manner; and the automatic documentation of communication for later reflection. On the other hand, it can create a number of potential problems due to the social distance (Barón/Ortega 2018: 149), incoherent dialogue, and ambiguities in the interpretation (Alpay 2005: 7).

To understand e-mail communication, a number of studies (Ford 2006; Allami/Serajfard 2012; Chen 2015) carried out experiments with students writing e-mails for specifically created situations, though these tasks may have lost authenticity (Bardovi-Harlig 2013: 7). Their results led to a number of studies related to the pedagogical perspective of e-mail writing, presenting aspects to be taught in order to avoid problems in real-life situations (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2015; Barón/Ortega

2018). Furthermore, authors were interested in opening and closing sentences in e-mails (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011), politeness aspects (Biesenbach-Lucas 2006; Hendriks 2010; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016; Kim/Lee 2017) and speech act performances (Chen 2001; Biesenbach-Lucas 2006).

In e-mails, selecting the form of address and complimentary form are of great significance, since the correspondents utilize these elements to perceive their relationships (Bjørge 2007). The appropriate level of formality in e-mails is influenced by how well one knows the recipient, whether they have already established a relationship, whether the recipient dislikes e-mails without certain elements such as greetings and sign-off or finds them unnecessary, and finally, by personal style and preferences of both sender and receiver (Bjørge 2007). The authors also suggest (following Ardila 2003) that, culturally, new generations might be less formal, which may affect their pragmatic choice. Ardila (2003) claims that, in the university setting (in Spain in the period between 1960s and 1990s), the informal addressing has become more preferred than the formal one. This is the suggestion by the present study as well.

There are a number of structures that may help students gain their professors' trust, engaging them in a digital communication. Research presents diverse linguistic features that are used by writers in order to shape their texts to meet the expectations of the readers (Swales 1990; Hyland 2000). Students as writers need to present their argumentation, interpretation and requests so that professors and readers are likely to find them persuasive and credible. In order to construct an academic identity that can be recognized as positive and trusting, writers may use diverse metadiscourse markers, such as self-mentions (e.g., Ivanic 1998; Hyland 2001b; Akbas/Hardman 2017), hedges and boosters (Hyland 1998a; Akbas/Hardman 2018), interpersonal metadiscourse (Crismore 1989; Hyland 1998b; Bogdanović/Mirović 2018; Ho 2018), stance markers (Hyland 1999; McGrath/Kuteeva 2012), or engagement markers (Hyland 2001a; Allami/Serajfard 2012). Likewise, a number of authors focused on the differences in metadiscourse markers in academic writing when writing in L1 and L2 (e.g., Mirović/Bogdanović 2016; Hatipoğlu/Algi 2018).

Thus, one of the possibilities to engage readers into the academic dialogue via e-mails is the use of engagement markers. These markers

explicitly build a relationship with the reader (Hyland 2005), trying to focus their attention, guide them through interpretations, and include them in the dialogue (Hyland 2001a). Using engagement markers, writers anticipate reader's background knowledge, interests, and interpersonal expectations; they manage their impression of the writer, and try to monitor their understanding and response. Hence, they seem to be appropriate markers to be used by students to appeal to their professors.

One more important aspect in the student-professor relationship, influencing this digital communication, is the power distance. As one of four dimensions of culture, Hofstede (^{2}2001) defines power distance as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede ^{2}2001: 98). In an educational system, according to Hofstede's research (^{2}2001: 100-102, 107) a high power distance educational situation comprises inequality in a teacher-student relationship: teachers should be treated with respect, the educational process is teacher-centred, teachers do not expect to be contradicted or criticised, teaching is fact-oriented, and students are not encouraged to speak up in classes. This contrasts with low power distance educational situations, which comprise teacher-student equality: teaching is student-centred, critical discussion is expected, and teachers have to be prepared to be challenged in class.

The power distance index from 1991, for Yugoslavia, and projected for Serbia, was 86 (Hofstede ^{2}2001: 45-46, 501).[1] It is clear that Serbia used to be a high power distance society, where hierarchy and inequality were accepted and addressed as such. In a more recent research, Nedeljković (2011) calculated the power distance index to be approximately 56 for Serbia, while Podrug et al. (2014) calculated it to be 51.91. The authors clearly confirmed that Serbia moved from high to low(er) power distance society, evident in the fact that more people refuse to accept social inequalities and demonstrate a growing demand for individual social independence.

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[1]   Power distance rankings are based on averages; the maximum score for a country can be 104, and low power distance cultures have their index score 40 or below (Hofstede, 2001).

The aim of this study is to investigate the use of engagement markers in e-mail communication between students and professors, focusing on both qualitative and quantitative research. The creation of the trusting relationship among discourse participants should explain whether students use engagement markers, how they use them when they write in L1 (Serbian) and L2 (English), and whether the power distance academic setting present in the university influences the student-professor relationship in any aspect.

3. Methodology

Over the course of one year, from September 2018 to September 2019, professors from the University of Novi Sad, Serbia and University of Maribor, Slovenia, collected e-mails sent by their students enrolled at academic undergraduate and graduate studies. Only initial e-mails in the communication were included in the corpus. These e-mails were part of regular written communication between students and their professors for which the students used no templates. The aim of the project was to analyse a number of diverse linguistic, interlinguistic and cultural elements, as well as contexts related to this aspect of academic writing.

The corpus for this study includes 124 e-mails in English and 150 e-mails in Serbian, with approximately the same number of words (6,544 words in e-mails in English and 6,469 words in e-mails in Serbian). These particular e-mails from the overall corpus were written by undergraduate students of engineering and management from two universities[2] to three professors teaching ESP courses at these two universities.

Engagement markers, as a focus of this study, were analysed following the Hyland's (2001a: 553, 2005a, 2005b) taxonomy. Hyland established the taxonomy following the research about interactive

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[2]   E-mails written by Slovene students in Slovene were part of the project, yet not selected for this research.

features of academic writing (e.g. Bondi 1999; Hyland 1999, 2000) and on grammars (Halliday 1994; Biber et al. 1999). The analysis during the project revealed that the taxonomy could be applied to the corpus in this study. Hence, the engagement markers analysed include the following:

1.   Questions, both real and rhetorical;
      [e.g. *Can you please check?* (E32);[3] *Can we settle for another day?* (E16)]

2.   Inclusive first person, indefinite, and second person pronouns and items referring to readers;
      [e.g. *We will have exam preparation* (E61); *I kindly ask you to assist me* (E83)]

3.   Directives, including imperatives, obligation modals referring to actions of the reader (must, ought, should, have to, need to), and adjectival predicates controlling a complement to- clause, directing readers to a particular action;
      [e.g. *I need support* (E42); *Is it possible that I apply* (E13)]

4.   References to shared knowledge;
      [e.g. *In your last email message you let us know* (E74); *Of course, we guarantee we will attend your classes* (E68)]

5.   Asides addressed to the reader, marked off from the ongoing flow of text.
      [e.g. *To be honest I totally forgot* (E6); *Unlucky, I was in a bit hurry yesterday* (E86)]

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3   All examples are taken from the corpus. E-mails in Serbian are marked by S and e-mails in English by E, followed by the number of e-mail in the corpus. All examples in Serbian are written originally and translated into English. These are referred by the same number of the example, while in the examples listed, Serbian original is marked with (a) and English translation is marked with the same number and (b).

4. Corpus analysis

During the project realization, there was evidence that students tend not to perceive e-mails as formal pieces of academic writing. Rather, students tend to write in lower power distance context and tend to be less formal. Following that direction, one would assume that engagement markers are plenty to be found in students' digital correspondence. As this study will demonstrate, it is only partially correct.

Engagement markers	E-mails in English Total no. of instances	E-mails in Serbian Total no. of instances
QUESTIONS		
real	26	103
rhetorical	0	0
READER PRONOUNS		
inclusive first person pronouns	10	2
indefinite pronouns	1	1
second person pronouns	64	45
DIRECTIVES		
imperatives	1	0
obligation modals	3	2
adjectival predicates in *to*-clauses	6	14
SHARED KNOWLEDGE	4	8
PERSONAL ASIDES	20	2

Table 1. Occurrence of engagement markers in students' e-mails.

Table 1 displays the number of markers found in students' e-mails. All examples were examined in their sentential context and both authors evaluated that they only addressed readers, i.e. professors. The examples were treated as a single instance regardless the number of words, and only instances were counted. As Table 1 demonstrates, when students write in English, they prefer second person pronouns as a manner to acknowledge the need to meet the reader's expectations of solidarity and membership in the academic in-group (Hyland 2001a: 555). Students also ask real questions when writing in English. However, these are used much more when they write in Serbian, thus

rhetorically positioning the professor as a critic who will have to enter the discourse and answer these questions (Hyland 2001a: 557). As a formal way of addressing their professors, students use a great number of second person pronouns in e-mails in Serbian as well. In order to observe the student-professor relationship more closely, each engagement marker will be analysed separately, from the least to the most used ones.

4.1 Directives

In academic writing, directives are frequent markers used to initiate reader participation by instructing the reader to perform an action or to see things in a way determined by the writer (Hyland 2001a, 2002). When students write e-mails to professors, directives present a very rare category, used in order to refer to the action of the reader, aka professor.

Directives include several forms: modals of obligation, imperative and adjectival predicates in the extraposed *to*-clauses (Hyland 2002). Unfortunately, students tend not to use these markers in order to build the relationship and direct their professor to do something for them. Directives include modals of obligation (1, 2), which are usually writer-oriented, signaling what the writer/student believes to be necessary or desirable. In the corpus, there are only three examples of modals in English e-mails and two in Serbian e-mails. When using modals of obligation, students imply that the action should be carried out by the reader/professor. In examples (1, 2), even though written in first person singular, students imply that the professor should correct the CV attached, or write down the grade in the student's booklet. The lack of implication to the professor can be attributed to students' feeling that they cannot direct their professors into doing something, as much as they would like to have something completed. Thus, they would prefer using other engagement markers.

(1)   As I mentioned in the class, I will be applying for Emirates soon and I would appreciate if you could tell me what *should* I keep in my CV and what *should* I delete for that occasion. (E108)

(2a)   Da li mi možete reći kada i gde će biti usmeni jer sam pismeni deo Stručnog
         engleskog položio u prošlom roku? *Treba* i da upišem ocenu iz engleskog nižeg
         srednjeg. (S18)

(2b)   Can you tell me when and where the oral will be because I passed the written
         part of Professional English in the last term? I *should* also write the grade from
         English pre-intermediate. (S18)

(3)   And about the exam if *it's possible to take* it after the new year somewhere
         between the 5th and 10th of January? (E21)

(4a)   Da li *postoji mogućnost da* se pomeri datum izlaganja prezentacije? (S62)

(4b)   Is there *a possibility to move* the presentation date? (S62)

Directives can also be in the form of imperative. Typically, in academic
writing, one could find the examples of *note, concede, consider* to
introduce the reader into the text, focus their attention, or emphasize
important points (Hyland 2001a). However, in e-mails, as expected,
there are no imperatives. In a short digital form, students do not need to
emphasize or focus, since they are trying to be as brief as possible.

       The only form of directives that students tend to use in e-mails
are adjectival predicates in *to*-clauses (3-7). There are 6 instances in e-
mails in English and 14 instances in e-mails in Serbian. Interestingly,
in both languages, the only adjective is *possible* and the only structures
to be used are direct or indirect questions (5, 6, 7) with this particular
adjective. Students are using this form to initiate the relationship with
the teacher and to initiate their participation in the action needed to be
taken. As already observed, students avoid to use adjectival predicates
such as *it is necessary*, *it is important*, since these may be aggressive
and thus intervene with building a trusting relationship.

(5)   *Is it possible* maybe that I can apply now or if it is possible that I take the exam
         now and apply for the next one in January? (E13)

(6a)   Da li Vam mogu doneti opravdanje (otpusnu listu) na uvid kada dođem na
         predavanja? *Da li postoji mogućnost* da nadoknadim moje odsustvo? (S146)

(6b)   Can I bring you an excuse (discharge list) for inspection when I come to
         lectures? *Is there a possibility to make up* for my absence? (S146)

(7a) Ja nisam u mogućnosti da dođem na ta predavanja jer imamo stručnu ekskurziju od 1.11. do 11.11. pa bih Vas zamolila da mi samo kažete *da li postoji neki način* da nadoknadim te moje izostanke? (S93)

(7b) I am not able to come to those lectures because we have a professional excursion from 1/11 to 11/11, so I would ask you to just tell me *is there a possibility to make up* for my absences? (S93)

It can be concluded that students rarely use directives in their e-mails to professors and do not find these metadiscourse markers suitable for building a trusting relationship with professors. The situation is similar with markers related to shared knowledge.

4.2 Shared knowledge

Metadiscourse markers appealing to shared knowledge draw on what is common between writers and readers in numerous ways, by using jargon, acronyms, preferred metaphors, familiar argument structures, citation practices, and so on, within the common frame of seeing the world, identifying problems, and resolving issues (Faber 1996; Hyland 2000, 2001a). These markers present a less imposing strategy, since students can use disciplinary and classroom understandings to build a relationship with their professors and thus provide a positive reaction on their side. However, as this research demonstrates, students prefer asking direct questions and they do not rely on the strategy to refer to mutual knowledge.

As depicted in Table 1, there were only four instances of shared knowledge in English e-mails and eight examples in e-mails in Serbian. In these examples, students use markers to refer to a previous arrangement (8) or to something already stated (9).

(8) *In reference to our agreement* I am sending you an email example for order of 20 bottles of Flaska. (E84)

(9a) *Imajući gore navedeno u vidu*, da li biste mi, molim Vas, izašli u susret i napisali potvrdu/dokaz o poznavanju engleskoj jezika? (S110)

(9b)   *With the above in mind*, would you please help me and write a certificate/proof of English language proficiency? (S110)

In academic papers, the adverbial phrase *of course* is the most common explicit appeal to shared knowledge (Hyland 2001a: 567). Although this marker can be observed as a marker of epistemic stance that indicates writer's certainty of a proposition (Biber et al. 1999: 540), it can also be used to move the focus of the conversation from the student to the professor or a situation that the professor will understand (Hyland 2001a) (11). This marker can also be used to build a trusting relationship by anticipating a possible objection and providing an expected solution to it (10). In students' e-mails, *of course/naravno* is used only a few times. As already mentioned, students do not recognize the possibility to use the marker to acknowledge the professor that they had already anticipated an obstacle or a problem.

(10)   *Of course*, we guarantee we will attend your classes, participate in debate as much as we can and at the end of semester pass the exam. (E68)

(11a)   Zanima me da li u njoj [prezentaciji] sme da se nalazi i neki video, *naravno* bez zvuka... (S65)

(11b)   I am interested if it [the presentation] can hold a video, *of course* without sound (S65)

Contrary to expectations, students tend not to use slang or jargon as shared knowledge. In English, they probably do not use it since they do not know it. As non-native English speakers, students may be familiar with idioms and colloquial expressions only in the domain of oral communication. In Serbian, only four instances of jargon were found (12, 13). In the example (12), a student uses the colloquial expression "throw out results" instead of the collocations "release/post results", while in the example (13), a student is talking about "social exam term" which only professors and students from the same institution, i.e. same discourse community, understand what it is and when it is.

(12a)   Da li se zna kada ćete *izbaciti rezultate* sa predispitnih obaveza? (S4)

(12b)   Is it known when you will *throw out the results* from the prerequisites? (S4)

(13a) Položila sam Engleski jezik – stručni u *prvom socijalnom roku*, upisala sam se sa statusom budzeta... (S10)

(13b) I passed the English language – professional *in the first social exam term*, I enrolled with the budget status ... (S10)

Hence, it can be concluded that in academic e-mail communication, students still pay attention that their writing is grammatically correct and quite formal, avoiding jargon and acronyms as metadiscourse markers of shared knowledge.

4.3 Personal asides

The first encouraging reference for metadiscourse markers comes with the use of personal asides. Asides are used as a metacomment when the writer directly addresses the reader, briefly breaking off the argument. It is rather common in social sciences and humanities; these fields deal with less predictable variables and more diverse research outcomes, so the readers have to be drawn in and involved as participants in a dialogue (Hyland 2001a: 561). These metadiscourse markers express something of the writer's personality and willingness to intervene explicitly to offer a view and acknowledge the relationship with the reader. Hence, they present a valuable marker in e-mails and could help students in building a trusting relationship with their professors.

When writing in Serbian, students do not use any metacomments. They do not recognize the possibility of building a relationship in this manner. There were only two instances in e-mails in Serbian (14, 15). In example (14), by providing a comment about the workload at the registrar's office, the student wanted to provoke empathy in the teacher, hoping it would help with the exam application that had not been submitted in time. In example (15), the initial statement in the e-mail immediately implies that there is a problem and that it will take the teacher's involvement for it to be solved. Moreover, this metacomment is presented before the actual problem is described, as an appeal to the teacher's willingness to follow the reasoning presented in the

continuation of the e-mail and to accept the student's argumentation as such.

(14a)   *U studentskoj službi je verovatno veliko opterećenje*, pa prijava ispita za 28.01. ne može da prođe još uvek. (S37)

(14b)   *They probably have a great workload in the student service*, so the application for the exam on January 28 can't pass the system just yet. (S37)

(15a)   *Pišem Vam u nadi da se moja situacija može rešiti*. Polagala sam vaš predmet 2016. godine i položila sam ga (S117)

(15b)   *I am writing to you with the hope that my situation can be resolved*. I took your course in 2016 and I passed it (S117)

However, when students write in English, they tend to use asides more often to comment on their argumentation. There were 20 instances in 124 e-mails, meaning that one fifth of students writing in English actually used them. In most cases, personal asides are used to communicate a more personal explanation related to the topic of the e-mail (16, 18). Sometimes these explanations are not suitable to be presented to professors (16); they can be attributed to low power distance between students and professors, or students' belief that honesty establishes a trusting relationship. Likewise, personal asides are used to explicitly offer a view, a positive opinion (17) as a reader-oriented strategy, in order to build a closer relationship with the professor. In most cases, this strategy is beneficial, since teachers (at least those participating in the project) positively responded to personal asides and were willing to invest in the student-professor relationship.

(16)   I am sorry for my absence on the speaking exam. *To be honest I totally forgot* about it. (E6)

(17)   I really hadn't that kind of experience, and i can say *it was worth every atom of my attention*! (E9)

(18)   For some reason, *probably my ancient computer*, I have difficulties with posting on forum. (E95)

4.4 Pronouns

The corpus of e-mails in this study reveals that students prefer using second person pronouns to inclusive first person pronouns and indefinite pronouns. Since students are writing directly about their own issues, it is understandable that indefinite pronouns are not used. There was only one instance of indefinite pronoun in e-mails in Serbian (20) and one in e-mails in English (19).

(19)   I will send an email if *anyone* changes their mind. (E113)

(20a)   *Da li se zna* kada ćete izbaciti rezultate sa predispitnih obaveza? (S4)

(20b)   Is *it* known when you will throw out the results from the prerequisites? (S4)

Inclusive *we* is often used to explicitly bring readers as discourse participants into the text (Hyland 2001a: 557). One would assume that students regard lectures as something related to both them and professors, and that they perceive professors as discourse participants. Hence, inclusive *we* should have been present in their e-mail correspondence. However, the corpus proves that assumption wrong. There are only two examples of inclusive *we* in e-mails in Serbian (21). In students' e-mails, there is a strong distinction between "us" students and "you" teacher (22). Even though in example (22) a student is writing about lectures, there is a clear distinction that "we" (students) did not have lectures because "you" (teacher) were absent, as if the professor is not the part of those lectures. One possible assumption is that students, when thinking and writing in Serbian, have the traditional distinction between professors and students, i.e. they are thinking in terms of high power distance context. In doing so, they are unconsciously failing to accept that students and professors belong to the same discourse community and have the same practice in e-mail communication.

(21a)   Da li [*mi*] imamo sutra predavanje? (S3)

(21b)   Do *we* have a lecture tomorrow? (S3)

(22a)   *Mi* imamo predavanja sredom. Poslednje srede *mi* nismo imali predavanja, jer
        ste *vi* bili na bolovanju. (S8)

(22b)   *We* have lectures on Wednesdays. *We* didn't have lectures last Wednesday,
        because *you* were on sick leave. (S8)

On the other hand, when they think and write in English, where this
academic gap has not been emphasized, students use inclusive *we* more
freely. As a result, there are 10 instances of inclusive *we* in e-mails in
English. Nevertheless, students use *we* only when they refer to the
shared activity, the one involving both the teacher and the student (23,
24). In classes in English, the power distance tends to be lower and the
trusting student-professor relationship is already established in the
classroom and thus can be reflected in e-mails.

(23)   When can *we* do the Skype meeting? (E21)

(24)   *We* could have *our* last lecture [...] differently. (E82)

Since they are addressing their professors, second person pronouns are
often used. Half of the e-mails in English and a third of e-mails in
Serbian contain second person pronouns (25, 26). This is the most
obvious manner of building a relationship with professors, textually
constructing both the student and the professor as participants with
similar understanding and goals (Hyland 2001a: 558). Using second
person pronouns is a well-known persuasive strategy, encouraging the
reaction to the e-mail and hoping for a reply.

       However, what is striking about this is the lack rather than the
presence of second person pronouns. Corpus analysis of students' e-
mails has revealed that students are quite "self-observed". Half of the
e-mails in English and two thirds of e-mails in Serbian are written in
first person singular (27, 28). Explicit "I" is present everywhere.
Students have a problem, they have a situation, they need something,
and it is half of the time in first person singular. For instance, in example
(28), instead of asking when the professor will hold tutorials, the student
is presenting the question in first person singular, asking when they can
come to tutorials. Apparently, students do not tend to establish a
relationship nor engage the professor in the communication. This may

appear rather odd, since the objective of digital communication is to write to their professors and engage them in a dialogue.

(25) In the course *you* mentioned that *you* can send a link to "drive" for "listening" lessons. Can *you* please send me? Thank *you*. (E69)

(26a) Da li *biste* [*Vi*] mogli molim *Vas* da mi date potvrdu o znanju engleskog, kako bih mogla da se prijavim za razmenu studenata? (S107)

(26b) Could *you* please give me a certificate of English proficiency so that I can apply for a student exchange? (S107)

(27) *I* have some problems with *my* e mail account... *I* think *you* did not get may [*my*] mail. (E70)

(28a) Poštovana, kada [*ja*] *mogu doći* na konsultacije? (S108)

(28b) Dear, when *can I come* for a tutorial? (S108)

The use of pronouns in e-mails is in opposition with their usage in research articles (Hyland 2001a). In this academic genre, the inclusive *we* is most often used to explicitly bring the reader into the text as discourse participants, while second person pronouns occur only rarely due to the fact that the reader's presence is not explicitly acknowledged.

4.5 Questions

Questions present a dialogic strategy, inviting engagement and bringing the reader into the discourse (Hyland 2001a: 569). In academic writing, direct questions are a "minor way of establishing a niche" (Swales 1990: 156), usually avoided and replaced with indirect questions (Swales/Feak 1994: 74). However, since questions challenge the reader into thinking about the topic, having a direct appeal in bringing the reader into the dialogue with the writer (Webber 1994: 266), it is understandable that this will be a common strategy to establish a dialogue between students and professors. Asking questions is also directly linked to the purpose of e-mail communication, which is to begin a dialogue and obtain desired information. E-mails have a

conversational aspect and they imply questions being asked and answered.

As expected, there are no rhetorical questions in e-mails. Students do not need to be rhetorically positioned in this dialogue; rather, they seek the answer immediately. However, the results demonstrate (see Table 1) that students ask more questions in Serbian than in English. The results demonstrate that students tend to thank or apologize when writing in English, without explicitly needing anything. If they ask a question, they often explicitly acknowledge that the question is to follow (29, 30), and they prefer indirect (30) to direct questions. In high power distance communities, indirectness is more appreciated; hence, students may feel that they will engage professors in the dialogue more likely if they tend to be less direct.

(29)   *My question is* how to make a new date? (E18)

(30)   I am *writing to ask* whether it would be possible to postpone my 1st presentation. (E52)

On the other hand, when students write e-mails in Serbian, they always have a question in mind. There are 103 questions in the Serbian corpus of e-mails, which constitutes two thirds of e-mail corpus. This is the only engagement marker category that students extensively use when writing e-mails in Serbian. This is the most direct engaging technique. Due to the higher power distance setting in the classroom, students often begin with the indirect question (*Can you tell me, I am interested, I would like to ask*) and then they continue with the direct question and finish with the question mark (31, 32, 33). The beginning and ending may be in opposition; however, students feel that indirectness is necessary in order to establish the dialogue with the professor, while directness is something they are familiar with and commonly utilize.

(31a)   *Da li mi možete reći* kada i gde će biti usmeni? (S18)

(31b)   *Can you tell me* when and where will the oral be happening? (S18)

(32a)   *Interesuje me da li* postoji mogućnost uvida u radove? (S43)

(32b)   *I am interested* is there a possibility of seeing the papers? (S43)

(33a)   *Htela sam da Vas pitam* kada mogu doći na konsultacije? (S113)

(33b)   *I wanted to ask you* when can I come for a tutorial? (S113)

Even though this strategy can provide them with the answer and establish a trusting relationship with their professor, students should be able to utilize other markers as well.

5. Conclusion

E-mails between students and professors present an important segment of academic writing. While writing e-mails, students assume that the words and expressions they use would be suitable enough to make teachers want to be engaged in this digital conversation. Even though the conventions in higher education institutions imply that professors have to answer students' e-mails, students as writers still have to follow certain rules in politeness, formality and adequate expressions in order to actually receive the answer. Hence, they need all the help in recognizing the appropriate linguistic expressions to be utilized in this communication.

The aim of the research has been to demonstrate whether and to what degree students use engagement markers when they write to their professors. Following Hyland's (2001a: 553) taxonomy, the study focused on five features as the evidence of reader engagement: questions, personal pronouns, directives, shared knowledge and personal asides. As demonstrated in the paper, students tend not to use personal asides, directives or shared knowledge. These may seem as too indirect and personal, and as such not really welcomed in the higher power distance institutions. The instances found in the corpus belong to students' personal choices and are only occasional. Likewise, due to the nature of e-mails as genre, the corpus lacks rhetorical questions and contains only several instances of indefinite pronouns.

The paper demonstrates that the most common engagement markers in students' e-mails to professors are second person pronouns and real questions, both direct and indirect. Use of second person pronouns is understandable, and an obvious selection by the students. It is a well-known persuasive strategy, encouraging the reaction to the e-mail and anticipating a positive reply. This technique textually includes both the student and the professor as participants with similar understanding and goals. The study revealed that, even though students use second person pronouns, they also tend to be "self-observed", using first person pronoun instead of the second person. This strategy is something that students should learn to recognize and avoid, since it can lead to the lack of reply they are hoping to obtain. As anticipated, students ask questions in e-mails, since most of their e-mails are requests. However, the research demonstrated that they tend to ask more questions when they write in Serbian. In English, on the other hand, students prefer to write thank-you notes rather than requests and thus they do not utilize questions.

In conclusion, the research has presented that students use engagement markers, though not in the satisfactory amount. Time should be devoted to teach them the nuances important for academic communication and for achieving one's goals. Likewise, the final conclusion may be that, apart from teaching students about the structure of e-mails, we could devote some attention to "tricks of the trade", i.e. teach them how the use of engagement markers can actually help them build a relationship with the professor and thus get them closer to receiving a satisfactory answer.

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