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A Critical Functional Approach to Educational Discourses of Students and Professors over the Internet Context

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Abstract

This paper investigated the ways Iranian B.A and M.A students of English language and their professors represent themselves linguistically in their e-mails in general, and the ways they construct and negotiate power with regard to social and cultural norms in particular. It examined 84 e-mail messages students and professors exchanged in 2012-2013 academic year through Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and components of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Both parties actively used e-mails to create and maintain interpersonal relationship with each other in different ways. They mainly relied on material and mental processes to convey their meanings and thoughts and felt free in the selection and manipulation of thematic elements in their writings. With regard to the construction and negotiation of power it was also revealed that both parties reconstructed and recontextualized (Bernstein, 1971) discourses and practices of the traditional classrooms prescribed by their social, cultural, and religious norms in internet context. The findings of this study will shed light on the contributions of power relations, social and cultural norms as well as other related factors in the process of communication between professors and students. Such critical functional approach has a powerful impact on students and instructors in their professional learning contexts and offers instructors in internet contexts explicit ways of recognizing and valuing differences in the language students use to respond in those contexts.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis, E-mail messages, Halliday's SFG, CDA, Professors, Students.

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Introduction

Advances in new technologies have offered numerous ways for professors and students to communicate outside of class. E-mails, online lectures and courses as well as chat rooms have increased interaction in the form of out of class communication. Among various internet affordances, e-mail is considered a logical choice for out of class communication because it is very accessible and widely used on college campuses (Duran, Kelly & Keaten, 2009). E-mail has the potential of improving interactions between students and professors by providing a means of sending supportive information with personal attention directly to each student. It also enables them to overcome time and space limitations and difficulties of face to face communication (Alexander, Zhao & Underwood, 2002). Moreover, E-mail has the advantage of permitting a time interval between sending and receiving messages, which may stimulate some sort of reflection on its content which may influence interaction quality (Meij & Boersma, 2002).

E-mail as a form of internet discourse (Crystal, 2001) can also be analyzed discursively to reveal such features as age, educational, social and cultural features of their writers and the ways they employ linguistic items to convey specific meanings (e.g., Tanskanen & Karhukorpi, 2008, Ho, 2010; 2011, Hansford & Matus, 2011). Wodak (1995) believes that discourse should be regarded as a form of social act which is determined by social values and norms and social conventions and practices. Fairclough (1995) also believes in the close relationship of people's awareness of language and the development of language abilities and practices.

Various studies have examined the viewpoints of students and instructors with regard to internet affordances. For example, in a descriptive study, Terali and Tugun (2011) interviewed a number of university students in turkey to reveal the main purposes for which they use the internet. Results indicated that most of the students used internet for the purpose of researching. Their decadent priorities included other items such as using internet for the purpose of reading newspapers and magazines, playing games and chatting which

according to Terali and Tugun (2011) reminds us of the need of canalizing students into right sources to make them use internet more properly. Moreover, a study was also conducted by Liu (2012) in China with regard to using information technology. He used a questionnaire to assess teachers' views on the use of e-mail, software tools, and internet facilities for teaching and learning. Results showed that the use of word processing and e-mail were popular for most subjects of the study. But, they are less practical in using other tools especially presentation software, statistical packages, and desktop publishing which are essential in the development of their career profiles.

Concerning the efficiency of internet technologies in the learning and teaching context, Khorasani (2012) examined the efficacy of an online approach in teaching mathematics formulae through introducing web-page links. He selected two English Mathematics classes as experimental and control groups with the experimental group having to communicate with their teacher through e-mails. The results revealed that the final achievement scores of the experimental group were higher than those of the control group. Furthermore, Ghaderi (2011) investigated different dimensions of e-mail applicability and usefulness for assessing assignments. The sample of his case study consisted of 158 students from Kurdistan University during a semester. Interviewees revealed that, one important problem with assessing assignments via e-mail is that there is an equal time balance for sending assignments during the semester; and this creates a rush in managing assignments.

Li (2000) focused on the efficacy of task based writing activities which required students to write e-mails in a process oriented ESL writing class. The researcher in particular aimed at considering different linguistic features of their e-mails and tasks differed in terms of purpose, audience, and task structure. According to the results in e-mails which involved audience interaction, students tended to produce texts that were syntactically and lexically more complex.

Objective of the study

To the best of the researchers knowledge no study has been carried out to investigate the linguistic interactions between students and professors over the internet context and their ways of construction and negotiation of power in relation to the social and cultural norms. By raising students and professors awareness of their addresses writings habits, which often originate from their social and cultural norms will shed light on some factors whose recognition can result in more proficient teaching and learning. It also highlights the contributions of power relations in their process of communication. To further explore this issue, this study answers the following research questions:

- 1- How are their power relations in terms of social and cultural norms reflected in their internet interactions?
- 2- How do Iranian students and professors represent themselves linguistically in their interactions over the internet context?

Theoretical Framework of the study

Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

CDA is an approach to discourse analysis which focuses on inequality in society and the ways in which texts are used to realize power and ideology. Fairclough (1992) believes that CDA tries to make clear the connection between discourse practices, social and cultural practices, structures and relations, which may be unclear to the language users. Fairclough method of critical discourse analysis is mainly oriented towards the investigation of social-cultural aspects of language. His framework of analysis includes discourse practices and discourse events or sociocultural practices. Since e-mails can be used to convey the power and ideology of the writers, critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be of great importance in this kind of discourse.

This study used Fairclough theoretical framework as a result of its close connection to SFG and special attention it pays to the discourse and sociocultural practices. The notion of power, one of the main concerns of this study, is also of great significance in his theoretical framework. Fairclough (1995) asserted that power is

represented both in terms of asymmetries relations between participants in discourse events, and in unequal ability to control the way texts are produced, distributed and consumed in relation with specific social and cultural contexts.

Systemic Functional grammar (SFG)

In systemic functional linguistics it is believed that there are linguistic choices available to language users to express their meaning with regard to some pragmatic and contextual features. Given some contextual information, it becomes possible to understand what aspect of reality is being talked about and what the relationship between the interactants is. According to Cafferal (2006) systemic functional theory provides a powerful framework for studying the grammar of a particular language as meaning potential, that is, the lexicogrammatical choices available to the speakers of that language to mean in different contexts of use.

The fundamental question of CDA with regard to creation and negotiation of power and ideology can also be further investigated through systemic functional linguistics in general and relations and interactions of discourse participants in particular (interpersonal metafunction). CDA and SFG are believed to have some other points in common like sharing a view of language as a social construct, focusing on the role of language in society and the way society can shape language, and having a dialectical view between particular discourse events and the context in which they occur (Young & Harrison, 2004). Thus, this study used CDA and SFG as the theoretical frameworks to get a clearer picture of the kind of linguistic interaction negotiated between students and professors over the internet, as well as the way power is constructed by taking into account the role of context and other social, cultural, and factors on their interactions.

Methodology

Data collection

Three professors from the English department at Razi University in Kermanshah province were randomly selected to forward their students' e-mail messages along with their responses. Overall, 84 e-mail messages of students and professors were selected for this study. E-mail messages pertained to both BA and MA students. The reason was the higher number of students at these levels, which inevitably led to more internet interaction.

Data analysis

The analysis was a two folded process, in the first phase, explanation and interpretation was carried out based on CDA to investigate the role of such factors as social power and dominance, education, culture and social factors. And in the second phase a detailed description of the semantic and linguistics features of e-mails was done; which is based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG). SFG shows how meanings are made in different contexts using linguistic choices language users make in conveying their meanings. Both stages of analysis were thematic based, meaning that pre-specified statements of famous names were used for the interpretation of findings.

Results and discussion

Construction and negotiation of power in e-mail discourse

Modal expressions were classified based on the Biber et al. (1999) model, according to which modal expressions are of three kinds of permission/possibility/ability, obligation/necessity and violation/predication (cited in Lihua, 2009). Realization of each category and their frequency of occurrence in the data were presented in Table 1. It is worth mentioning that such linguistic items as *it is believed* and *there appears to be* were categorized as type one modals that refers to possibility

Table 1
Classification of modals and semi-modals in e-mails of students and professors

Type 1; Permission/possibility/ability	students	professors
Can	20	15
Could	2	0
May	5	1
Might	11	2
Type 2 ; Obligation/necessity		
Should	4	10
must	23	18
Have to	1	4
Need to	0	0
Be supposed to	0	0
Type 3; violation/ prediction		
Will	32	27
Would	10	9
Shall	1	3

Table 1 indicates that modals of violation/prediction constituted the largest proportion among the modals. After that, distribution of expressions of certainty and obligation/necessity, which helped establishing authority of the writers, occupied the next place and showed the authority of professors in their writings and obligation and/or reluctance of students in taking action.

As evident from Table 1, modals *will*, *must*, *can*, *would*, *should* occurred frequently and modals *will* and *must* manifested themselves as the foregrounded ones in the genre of e-mails. They were employed to convey authorial certainty or at least a strong prediction, about future events (e.g., *we'll discuss the details once we meet*, and ... *Here are two articles for the socio class this Sunday. We'll discuss both the content and the methodology of the articles*). The next two most frequently occurring modals were *would* and *should*. In the following sections, instances of violation/prediction and necessity/obligation were deliberately chosen to show how social power was constructed and negotiated in e-mail discourse.

Applying modals of volition/prediction. As noted earlier, modals of violation/ prediction particularly *will* were among the most important modals used in the discourse of e-mails. According to the classification of Biber et al. (1999) the modal *will* is commonly used to indicate both violation and prediction. Therefore, *will* functions as future tense as well as a kind of willingness, as shown in the following examples which are taken from the corpus of emails:

- 1) Next week, we *will* work on your proposals exclusively.
- 2) Sounds fine; bring a copy to class so that everybody has a chance to make some comments. I *will* also make some suggestions then.
- 3) Thanks for your attention, I *will* make the changes and send it to you, best.

In these examples *will* was used for both stating future actions and some sort of prediction. For instance, (3) indicates the future changes that student will make on his/her article followed by the action of sending it. According to Halliday (1994), modality shows the speaker judgment of the validity of a statement or its rights and wrongs and considers the use of *Will* as a sign of high inclination of the language user in doing something. Bazzi (2009) believes that among the functions of some finite elements like *will* and *must* are indications of tense and judgment of the speaker or writer. As a result these examples show the writers judgment of the truth of their statements and inclination in doing those actions as well.

Applying modals of necessity/obligation. The next most frequently used modals in e-mails were those of necessity/obligation. They can refer to intrinsic obligation and extrinsic necessity of modals.

- 4) Sorry about the delay in sending my translation. I *had to* travel with my family the previous week. I hope you will accept it.
- 5) I have not assigned any article for the next class. You *should* just read the first three chapters of the book. From each chapter select one exercise and 4.

In (4) *had to* was written in capital letters to show the students reluctance with regard to going to that specific travel, which led to the delay in sending the translation. In this e-mail, by attributing the blame to his/her family the writer seeks to distance him/herself from the violation of the professor's statement for sending the translation by the required time. This shows the effect of culture or religion in their interactions. In Iranian culture and Islamic contexts teachers possess a high social status and are highly respected. Van Dijk (2008) considers the effects of culture on interaction in different contexts and asserts that some shared social attitudes, ideological values and norms may influence the nature of interactions. Another conclusion to be made from this distance is student fear of the consequences of violating the teachers statement who has more power and authority. In this example, in addition to making an excuse the student tried to persuade the professor to accept the translation. While this showed the professors' higher social position and power in the mind of the student and fear of the consequences of the intentional delay in sending the translation, it also implied his/her resistance to this power.

Fairclough (2001) asserts that one form of power is through manufacturing the consent which led people to accept their statements or the proposed changes. Foucault (1972) believes that power can be noticed in terms of relationship between power and resistance which exist even between teacher and students. Maftoon and Shakouri (2012) also hold that teachers power can be resisted by their students complaining about examination time, quantity and quality of material to be covered and teaching or testing quality. In fact, there were examples of such resistances in the data which confirmed this statement (e.g., *we have covered this book in B.A, but it is not without benefits to a sketchy review. I do not want your idea about Hudson and Fasold is. We will cordially welcome whatever materials you think of as illuminating, anyway*). In sum, it can be concluded that even lower social status groups or individuals (students) could resist the power of those who are in higher social status (professors) and make them to take action in a very mild and gentle manner. In (2), the professor tried to remove students' doubt with regard to next class s assignment. The modal *should* clearly shows the necessity of doing an

action and the obligation in doing that. According to Eggins, 2002) power is also created through the use of imperative clauses. Professors higher usage of imperative clauses compared to students (13 to 0) indicates their willingness to keep and enforce power relationships. Contributing to this effect were such statements as “*Bring a copy to class...*”, “*revise and send it back by...*” and “*Let me know next time*” Students on the other hand, had no case of using imperative sentences and their requests were indirectly expressed using structures such as “*would you mind and please.....*”

It can be concluded that Iranian students and professors were recontextualizing (Bernstein, 1971) discourses and practices of the traditional classrooms which are prescribed by their social, cultural and religious norms in internet context. Students, on the one hand, highly respected their professors either because of the principles of Islam religion which they have to respect those from whom they learn or because of their fear of the consequences of their resistance or disagreement. On the other hand, they tended to resist their professors` power and authority by trying to convince them to accept their opinions and excuses. Professors, however, while respecting the social position of their students (because according to Islam religion, those who seek knowledge should also be respected too) tended to use the authoritative role. They freely use imperative clauses and enjoyed using their power.

Linguistic representation of students and professors in e-mail discourse

In the section that follows the effect of context is examined based on experiential (ideational) and textual metafunctions of Halliday (1974), which are realized in transitivity and theme analysis. They allow examining the way through which the writers express their meaning and experiences and the topics they cover in their e-mails.

Experiential (ideational) metafunction. As for the realization of experiential (ideational) metafunction in e-mails or their transitivity analysis it was found that both groups of writers including students and professors with the percentages of 47% and 50% respectively

highly used material processes in their e-mails (e.g., *We will cordially welcome whatever materials you think of as illuminating, anyway*). The next two processes that dominated students and professors' writings were mental and relational attributive processes with the percentages of 23% and 14.12% for students and 22.4 % and 12.93% for professors respectively. Devoting almost one fourth of writings of both groups to mental processes suggested that their e-mails concern conscious cognition. There were many cases in both groups' writings devoted to expressing themselves and describing things such as "I am sorry", "I'm proud of myself....", "I am glad", and "last day was a tragic day...." Moreover, there were almost equal numbers of relational identifying processes like "I am one of your new students" and "Is the final draft of your proposal?" in writings of both groups. Table 2 below presents the total number of clauses of each process type in each group of emails.

Table 2

Total number of clauses of each process type in each group of emails

Processes	Students' E-mails	Professors' E-mails
Material	124 (47%)	58 (50%)
Mental	61 (23 %)	26(22.4%)
Verbal	10 (3.81%)	3 (3%)
Behavioral	0	0
Relational attributive	37 (14.12 %)	15 (12.93%)
Relational identifying	14 (5.34%)	11 (6.79%)
Relational possessive	11 (4.19%)	2 (1.23%)
Existential	3 (1.14%)	1 (0.61%)
Causative	2 (0.76%)	0
Total no. of processes	262	116

The higher usage of material process in Table 2 also implies that students and professors had a high number of Circumstances in proportion to the number of clauses in their e-mails, Circumstances function to increase the experiential content of the text, as they add specificity to the information given. The high frequency of circumstantial detail, contributes to increasing the experiential density

of the text, and complements other strategies used to make this written in mode. The dominant circumstances in all e-mails are those of location and time. Circumstances of cause and manner are at the next places respectively indicating what caused behaviors and things to be that way and how occur, how they are in that way.

Verbal processes, which are expressed using direct or indirect quotations, are rarely used in such messages with the percentages of 3.81% for students and 1.14% for professors. In other words, intertextuality (Kristeva, 1986) which refers to the relationship between the context of a text and other texts and statements, is rarely observed (cited in Van Dijk, 2008). Physiologically dominated participants and statements which are realizations of behavioral processes (e.g. *they were laughing*) also have no place in their writings. . The higher use of attributive processes by students (e.g., *"this was related to my presentation"*) and identifying processes (e.g., *is this the final draft of your proposal?*) by professors also indicate that they are good at descriptive and definitive writing respectively. The low presence of existential e-mail messages (statements that implies existence of something or somebody) in general suggests that these actions are in few cases framed as taking place within settings, which are asserted simply as existing. Causative processes, which deals with reasons and explanations, are rarely used in writing e-mails in general (e.g., *"I e-mailed it later cause u told that it would be ok to do so"*).

As such, transitivity analysis revealed that the experiences of writers are mainly stated using material and mental processes followed by relational ones. Students and professors mainly write about educational settings, processes and participants and in doing so they mainly focused on location and time of events. They could also successfully express themselves in terms of stating their imaginations, perceptions and feelings. Relational clauses also characterize writers and other things and persons concern them. They rarely used quotation and physiologically dominated participants and statements had no place in their e-mails.

Textual (theme) analysis. Theme analysis was done for all clauses in email messages. Table 3 summarizes the results of theme analysis.

Table 3

Theme analysis

Categories	students` E-mails	Professors` E-mails
Interpersonal elements as theme	37 (10.10%)	17 (9.18%)
Experiential elements as Theme	246 (66.39%)	126 (68.1%)
Textual elements as Theme	83 (25.53%)	42 (22.7%)
Total no. of themes	366	185
Marked Themes	47 (12.84%)	35 (18.91%)

As evident from Table 3, students have the higher number of themes in their writings. But, marked Themes (where Theme does not conflate with Subject) are more common in professors` writings (18.91%) than those of students (12.84%). This showed that professors were more careful in their e-mails; they use marked themes more than students and mention the main meanings using circumstances. Both groups had almost equal percentages (10.10% and 9.18 %) with regards to the use of interpersonal themes... As far as the use of experiential elements is concerned, it should be mentioned that there is not much difference between professors (68.1%) and students (66.39 %).

Comparing writings of students and professors, both groups feel free in selecting or manipulating thematic elements in their e-mails. That is, they use different topics or departure points and the use of thematic elements is somehow arbitrary (Cafferall, 2006) for them. The rates of using textual themes (about 22.7 % for Professors and 25.53% for students) which serves to relate new messages to the preceding text confirm this too. The following is an example which highlights different thematic structures in an email message.

Good afternoon,

1i. Last day was a tragic day for me ***1ii. because I*** almost loosed two tooth ***1iii. when I*** was playing football ***2i. I*** went to [saw] a dentist

2ii. *and* he told me I needed twenty stitches inside my mouth.

3. *As a result* I cannot speak properly during next week.

4. I send this e-mail to inform you beforehand.

5. Please **accept** my apologies.

It starts by writing about last day, followed by I pronoun as the main point of the second clause which refers to the writer. Then, there is a shift to last day again. After that, there are I and he pronouns that refer to the writer himself and the doctor he saw. Writer again writes about his situation and finally addresses his professor. This can also be noticed in other students and professors' e-mails too. Another conclusion to be made from this feature of wiring is that the speed of introducing new information is pretty high in both groups of writings since a part is devoted to already introduced topics, and new ones come up pretty fast (Larson, 139).

Theme analysis then showed that professors are more careful in their e-mails; they use marked themes more than students and mention the main meanings using circumstances. Both groups of writers devoted most of their clauses to physical and tangible participants and actions and that is because experiential themes dominate over other kinds of themes in their interaction. Also, they tend to cover different topics in their e-mails and introduce new information with a pretty fast speed. Given that, they do not use textual themes very much.

Conclusion, implications and suggestions for further research

Given the growing importance and usage of new technologies in higher education this study examined the linguistic realization of Iranian students and professors communication over the internet context. Among the points results of the study shed light on was the general structure of the e-mails of the investigated groups. Professors seem to be more careful about their statements in that they tend to stipulate them with conditions of time and place. Both groups of writers, however, are common in devoting most of their clauses to physical and tangible things and actions and that is because experiential themes dominate over other kinds of themes in their interaction. They cover different topics in their e-mails and introduce new information with a pretty fast speed.

The study highlights two main points whose implications for education seem obvious. First, there is a dialectical relationship between language, power, ideology and the significant role that language plays in the creation of power and legitimizing social inequalities. The results indicated that power construction and negotiation is mainly influenced by Iranian cultural, social and religious values, implication of which could be the point that teaching and learning related processes are matters of context dependency, which highly draw on a collection of discursive elements specific to each community. Parties engaged in these processes will benefit taking a more detailed look at them. Second, by noticing the fact that students and professors actively express themselves over this specific context one can imply that increasing their internet communications through developing some online courses and materials may result in increasing teaching and learning efficacy at higher education. The issue needs further exploration however. Examining students and professors` e-mail messages based on such factors as gender of the writers and their fields can also result in beneficial findings.

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