

What workplace emails reveal about culture

January 8 2015



Most of us use emails at work without so much as a second thought—but new research from Victoria University of Wellington shows a range of socio-cultural forces govern what and how we write.

A study by Jackie Yeoh, who graduated in 2014 with a PhD in Applied Linguistics, suggests possible [cultural differences](#) in the linguistic strategies people use to maintain rapport or assert power through email communications.

Her interest in the topic was sparked when she worked for several large

organisations in Malaysia and wanted to compare the more formal business emails in that country with those in New Zealand workplaces.

"I noticed in the course of my work that some Malaysian colleagues tended to use the imperative mood (direct commands such as 'Give me that report by 2pm') when making requests of their colleagues, which could be interpreted as rather forceful and sometimes impolite," she says.

"I had to manage a group of staff and I realised that it was at times difficult to assert power and authority via email and at the same time maintain good rapport with those who reported to me."

She conducted her research by collecting more than 1700 internal work-related emails from two New Zealand companies and one in Malaysia and by carrying out workplace visits, questionnaires and interviews.

Jackie found that the organisations used different strategies to maintain good workplace relationships. "In the New Zealand workplaces, an informal greeting (such as 'hi' or 'hello') plus the recipient's first name were used regardless of the relative status of the participants. In the Malaysian workplace, participants greeted their superiors with the more formal 'dear' plus the recipient's title (such as Mr or Mrs) then their first name. Failure to do this was deemed disrespectful."

However Jackie found that power and authority were expressed in similar ways across all three workplaces she studied. "They all used imperative mood, boosting devices (terms like 'ASAP' or 'of course') and the personal pronoun 'I'," she says. "The use of a combination of these strategies clearly showed that more emphasis was placed on getting the job done rather than maintaining rapport in these workplaces."

Jackie says an email exchange in the early days of her PhD research

starkly highlighted the difference in style between New Zealand and Malaysia.

"I was shocked when a potential supervising professor in New Zealand asked me to address her by her first name," she says. "In my culture where status and title are given emphasis, it is considered disrespectful and rude to address someone who is of a higher status with only the first name. It took me a long time to get used to this style of informal writing."

Provided by Victoria University

Citation: What workplace emails reveal about culture (2015, January 8) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-01-workplace-emails-reveal-culture.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.