

# Email Etiquette: A Pragmatic Analysis

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## Abstract

**This essay studies email etiquette, which is probably the most practical application of pragmatic theories. It deduces some common strategies for writing email from basic pragmatic theories and principles.**

## Keywords

**Pragmatics; Speech Act Theory; Politeness Theory; Grice's Cooperative Principle.**

## 1. Introduction

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that deals with the use of language in social contexts, focusing on how speakers and listeners interpret utterances in context. By applying theories from pragmatics, we can gain valuable insights into the unwritten rules that govern the use of email in professional and personal settings, as well as the factors that contribute to effective communication in this medium.

## 2. Context and Speech Acts

One of the fundamental concepts in pragmatics is context, which plays a critical role in determining the meaning of an utterance. In the case of emails, context includes factors such as the relationship between the sender and receiver, their respective roles within an organization, and the purpose of the communication. These factors influence the choice of language and tone in an email and can have a significant impact on how the message is received.

Speech act theory, first introduced by philosopher J.L. Austin and later developed by John Searle, is another useful tool for analyzing email communication. According to this theory, speech acts can be classified into various categories, such as representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations [1]. In emails, the most common types of speech acts are directives (requests or commands) and representatives (statements or assertions).

Emails often contain a combination of these speech acts. For example, a manager might send an email that includes a directive (e.g., "Please submit your report by Friday") as well as a representative (e.g., "I am confident in your ability to complete this task"). The appropriate use of speech acts in an email can have a profound effect on the clarity and persuasiveness of the message.

## 3. Politeness Theory

Another important aspect of pragmatics that is relevant to email etiquette is politeness theory. Developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, politeness theory posits that people have a desire to maintain positive face (the desire to be liked and appreciated) and negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition) [2]. To achieve this, speakers use various politeness strategies to minimize the potential face-threatening acts (FTAs) that can occur in communication.

In email communication, politeness strategies can be employed through the use of positive and negative politeness. Positive politeness involves expressing solidarity and appreciation, while

negative politeness involves minimizing the imposition on the receiver. Examples of positive politeness in emails include using expressions of gratitude (e.g., “Thank you for your help”) and addressing the receiver by their first name or a friendly greeting. Negative politeness strategies in emails include using indirect requests (e.g., “Would it be possible for you to...”) and hedges (e.g., “I was just wondering if...”).

Using appropriate politeness strategies in emails can help maintain good relationships between the sender and receiver and reduce the potential for misunderstandings or offense.

#### **4. Grice’s Cooperative Principle**

Grice’s Cooperative Principle is another key concept in pragmatics that can be applied to email etiquette. This principle posits that speakers and listeners engage in a cooperative effort to achieve successful communication. In his book *Logic and Conversation* Grice proposed four conversational maxims that guide this cooperative effort: the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner [3].

Quantity means to provide just enough information – not too much, not too little. In emails, this means providing all the necessary details for the receiver to understand the message, but not overwhelming them with irrelevant or excessive information.

Quality is to be truthful and only share information for which you have evidence. In the context of emails, this means ensuring that the information provided is accurate and reliable and avoiding spreading misinformation or making unfounded claims.

The requirement for Relation is to stay relevant to the topic at hand. In emails, this means ensuring that the content of the message is directly related to the subject line and not deviating into unrelated topics.

Manner requires clear, brief, and orderly elaboration. For emails, this means using clear and concise language, organizing the content in a logical manner, and avoiding unnecessary jargon or technical terms that could confuse the receiver.

By adhering to Grice’s Cooperative Principle and its associated maxims, email communication can be more effective, efficient, and courteous.

#### **5. Implicature and Email Ambiguity**

Another important notion in pragmatics is implicature, which refers to the implied meaning of an utterance that goes beyond the literal meaning of the words used. Implicature can be either conventional (based on the conventional meaning of the words) or conversational (based on the context and the cooperative principle). In email communication, the potential for misinterpretation of implicatures can lead to misunderstandings or miscommunications.

Given the absence of non-verbal cues and the asynchronous nature of email communication, there is an increased risk of ambiguity in the interpretation of implicatures. To minimize this risk, email senders should strive to be as explicit as possible in their communication and avoid relying on assumptions or shared knowledge that may not be immediately apparent to the receiver. Additionally, using clear and unambiguous language, as well as providing appropriate context, can help reduce the potential for misinterpretation of implicature in emails.

#### **6. Code-switching and Email Registers**

Code-switching, the practice of alternating between different linguistic varieties within a single conversation or interaction, is a common phenomenon in spoken language. In the context of email communication, code-switching can be observed in the use of different registers (formal or informal) depending on the context and the relationship between the sender and receiver.

Formal register, characterized by the use of standard grammar, punctuation, and more complex sentence structures, is generally expected in professional settings, particularly when communicating with superiors or individuals outside one's organization. Informal register, on the other hand, is marked by a more relaxed tone, colloquial language, and the use of abbreviations or emoticons. Informal register may be appropriate when communicating with colleagues or friends in less formal contexts.

Understanding the appropriate register to use in a given email context is crucial for effective communication and maintaining good relationships with email recipients. Misuse of register, such as using overly informal language in a professional setting, can be perceived as disrespectful or unprofessional and may negatively impact the sender's credibility and reputation.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of pragmatics theories offers valuable insights into the unwritten rules and expectations that govern email communication. By understanding and applying concepts such as context, speech acts, politeness theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, implicature, and code-switching, individuals can enhance their email etiquette, leading to more effective, courteous, and professional communication.

As email continues to be a primary mode of communication in both personal and professional contexts, it is essential for individuals to develop a strong understanding of the pragmatic principles that underpin email etiquette. By doing so, they can navigate the complexities of email communication with greater ease and confidence, ultimately fostering stronger relationships and more successful outcomes in both their personal and professional lives.

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## References

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