

Constructing Identities In The Workplace Through Request E-Mail Discourse – How Does One Benefit From It?

Victor Ho
victorho@hkbu.edu.hk
The Language Centre
Hong Kong Baptist University

Abstract

This paper discusses the construction of personal identities through the request e-mail discourse by a group of professional English language teachers of a public education institution in Hong Kong. Facing the downsizing of the civil service, the revised appraisal system, and the tighter budget of the Hong Kong SAR government following the Asian financial crisis, teachers working in Hong Kong public schools have less chances of getting promotion and pay rises. To put themselves in an advantageous position in relation to get a promotion and a pay rise, as argued in this paper, the teachers constructed two personal identities online before their peers and superiors in their workplace. A total of 50 e-mails met the two criteria that follow and formed the corpus of the present study: containing at least one request, and having teachers of the same rank as the author and recipients. The request e-mail discourse is analyzed at the clause level with respect to transitivity, mood and modality by drawing upon systemic functional linguistics. It is found that the teachers, using the resources available in the English language grammar, constructed for themselves the identity of a responsible, hardworking member, and of a member with authority and power. This paper hopes to achieve three aims – (1) to contribute to the understanding of the constitutive effect of discourse; (2) to illustrate how such effect could be manipulated by discourse producers in order to achieve both their communicative and political aims; and (3) to enhance people's e-mail communication competency in the workplace.

Keywords: workplace identity, systemic functional linguistics, transitivity, mood and modality, appraisal.

Introduction

This paper analyzes the workplace request e-mail discourse qualitatively in order to reveal the strategies a group of Hong Kong English language teachers employed in increasing their chance of getting a promotion and a pay rise following the Asian financial crisis and the subsequent civil service reforms initiated by the Hong Kong government. Following the Asian financial crisis back in 1998, the Hong Kong government had taken a number of measures to cut its cost in maintaining its civil service workforce. Three such measures were downsizing the civil service workforce, revising the appraisal system, and employing non-civil service contract staff. The combined effect of these measures means that the existing civil servants and new recruits would have a smaller chance of getting a promotion, and that they would receive a performance-based

annual salary increment instead of the long-practised automatic taken-for-granted one. Facing the unfavorable condition, the teachers, who are civil servants themselves, would need to employ certain strategies to gain a promotion and/or an annual salary increment. Such strategies included those of constructing desirable personal identities.

In the next section of this paper, the literature on identity, identity construction, requests and request e-mails will be reviewed. First, the notion of identity and its construction will be discussed with reference to two identity frameworks – one proposed by Tracy (2002) and the other by Simon (2004). Second, previous studies on individuals' constructing identities by drawing upon the grammatical resources of the English language (e.g. Fairclough, 1993; McCabe, 2004; Patrona, 2005), will be discussed. Third, a review on requests in general and request e-mails in particular would follow. The Methodology section, which discusses the data collection process and mentions briefly how systemic functional linguistics is used in analyzing the request e-mails at the clause level, would be followed by the Results and Discussion section. Finally, the Conclusion will summarize the main arguments and findings of the study.

Literature Review

Identity and its construction

Identity has been viewed as being fixed and pre-existent (Wimmer, 2002) on the one hand, and dynamically constructed **during** interactions on the other (Graham, 2007). Two models of identity constitute the main theoretical framework of this paper – Tracy's (2002) and Simon's (2004). Tracy (2002) claims that people's identities can be put into four categories – master identities, interactional identities, personal identities, and relational identities. The focus of this paper is on personal identities which, according to Tracy (2002), are "relatively stable and unique" (2002, p.17). Examples of personal identities, which are referred to as "personality, attitudes, and character" (2002, p.18) in daily life, may include those of being honest, arrogant, helpful, and responsible. However, in this paper, I would argue that personal identities can also be "dynamic and situated accomplishments" (Tracy 2002, p.17). That is, personal identities are constructed during interaction. For example, teachers of the present study constructed their personal identity as that of a responsible member through their choice of transitivity and modality while requesting other teachers to perform a certain act through a particular e-mail, whilst they might be constructing another personal identity, that of being a member with authority and power with a different choice of modality and transitivity in another request e-mail at another time.

Simon (2004, p.45) proposes the Self-Aspect Model of Identity which builds on the premise that people engage in a process called "self-interpretation" (ibid) in which they "give coherence and meaning to their own experiences, including their relations with the physical and social environment" (ibid). People achieve such coherence and meaning-making goal through processing or organizing information and knowledge about themselves with a varying number of "self-aspects" (ibid). A person's individual identity is constructed whenever he/she focuses on the complex set or configuration of self-

aspects that is available and/or accessible to him/her. A person's self-aspects, and thus identity, increase in "complexity" (2004, p.74) as he/she constructs new self-aspects in new situations, and that he/she may use different combinations of self-aspects for self-interpretation in different situations. Such an increasingly complex configuration and selective self-interpretation of self-aspects give rise to an identity which is subject to change, and to multiple identities of an individual. (2004, p.52).

Both models suggest that an individual's personal identities are subject to change and thus, construction of personal identities is made possible. The construction of identities through discourse in particular is supported, for example, first by Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) who remark that language use establishes and maintains people's identities; and second by Coupland (1985, p.156) who holds that identity is to be managed by participants of discursive events 'from situation to situation, even from moment to moment'.

The construction of identities through discourse has been studied from the systemic functional linguistics perspective. For example, McCabe (2004) and Patrona (2005) study how mood and modality are used in identity construction. In McCabe's (2004) study of the use of mood and modality in the construction of authority, chapters or chapter sections of history textbooks for high-school and/or tertiary institutes form the corpus. He analyzes the clause complexes of the texts for mood, modal adjuncts, metaphoric modality, and finite moderator. He finds that textbook writers resort to mainly the declarative mood and a combination of modal adjuncts, metaphoric modality, and finite moderator in constructing their authority before textbook readers. In Patrona's (2005) study, a total of 540 expert turns taken from television discussion programs are analyzed for their modality by examining the modal verbs, adverbs and modal constructions used. With the use of both high and low modality, experts construct their identity as authoritative and knowledgeable public speakers. Some studies have demonstrated the use of transitivity elements in the construction of identity. In one study, Fairclough (1993), using his own experience of being an election candidate, demonstrates how the use of action process (i.e. material process) instead of relational process can be rhetoric, and how such use can help to signify the subject by conveying a stronger sense of dynamic activity. Apart from the various processes from which individuals can choose to use in the transitivity of a clause, the participants involved also serve as resources for them to construct their identity. In another study, Locher and Hoffmann (2006) study the emergence of the identity of an on-line expert adviser. They examine the lexicogrammar of the on-line interaction (in the form of question-answer records) between a group of on-line advisers and the members of the Internet community. The female online adviser deliberately chooses to refer to herself in the third person, and to the advice-seeker in the second person in order to construct and reinforce her identity as an authoritative expert. This paper mainly discusses how the e-mail authors draw upon the interpersonal metafunction (i.e. mood and modality) and the experiential metafunction (i.e. transitivity) of language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) in constructing their desirable personal identities through the request e-mail discourse.

Request and request e-mails

Request as a speech act has attracted considerable research interest (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1996; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Different definitions of the speech act have been offered. For example, Goffman (1971, p.145) defines a request as ‘a type of ritual which asks “license of a potentially offended person to engage in what could be considered a violation of his rights...At the same time he [the speaker] exposes himself to denial and rejection’; Scott and Jackson (1983, p.287) define a request as ‘an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to perform some action by virtue of the hearer having recognized that such an attempt is being made’. In this paper, Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris’ (1996, p.640) definition is adopted with slight changes to suit the professional and institutional context of the study. A request in this paper refers to an attempt by the e-mail author to get the recipient to perform an action required by the institutional, professional or personal circumstances through evoking the recipient’s need for compliance on the grounds of institutional, professional and personal motivators such as necessity, duty and goodwill.

E-mail has been established and regarded as a communication genre (Baron, 1998; do Carmo, in press; Kankaanranta, 2006) and has received considerable research attention (e.g. Baron, 2000; Goldner, 2006; Nickerson, 1999 and 2000), as has a particular sub-type which is the focus of this paper – the request e-mail (e.g. Virtanen & Maricic, 2000; Lee 2003, 2004a and 2004b; Kong, 2006). As the name of this genre indicates, the presence of at least one request in an e-mail making requesting the communicative purpose of this discourse type is the primary criterion for classifying e-mails as a member of this genre – request e-mail.

Methodology

The request e-mails

The request e-mails exchanged among the members of the group of English language teachers were collected from September 1, 2003 to August 31, 2005 (the author of this paper was one of the members of the group during the said period). The group of teachers started to use e-mails as one of their main communication channels upon the completion of the school extension project when they were allocated to offices located in different parts of the school premises making the usual face-to-face communication difficult and infrequent. An e-group was established with Yahoo for the purpose of maintaining frequent communication through exchanging e-mails. The default design of the e-group made every one of the e-mails sent by any one member of the group to any particular member(s) accessible by every member of the same group. Therefore, the e-mails sent by the teachers to their peers would be accessible by their superiors. The teachers sent e-mails for different purposes such as disseminating information, sharing good teaching practice, voicing out grievances and making requests. E-mails containing at least one request authored by and addressed to teachers of the same rank were collected. A total of 50 such e-mails formed the corpus of the present study.

The analysis

The request e-mail discourse is analyzed at the clause level – the transitivity (only the process type and inclusion/exclusion of Agent), mood and modality of the clauses are identified for analysis. The process type is obtained by identifying and subsequently classifying the main verb of the clause into one of the six processes – material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, or existential. The clauses are then analyzed by locating, if any, the “Agent” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p.285) of the process. The mood of the clause is determined and classified as one of the following – indicative declarative, indicative interrogative, or imperative. Finally, the modality of the clause is revealed by studying the author’s use of modal verbs in framing the proposition conveyed by the clause.

Following Locher and Watts (2005), an interpretive approach is used in analyzing the request e-mails and identifying the personal identities constructed. This approach is preferred rather than asking the e-mail authors and recipients what identities were being constructed for two reasons. First, both the authors and recipients might have then been asked to ‘react to real or intuited examples of interaction’ (Locher & Watts 2005, p.17), and that their views when being asked ‘might not correspond to what they perceived at the time’ (ibid). Therefore, there might be a chance that the identities constructed by the e-mail authors and identified in the analysis in this paper might not be the same for every e-mail recipient. Despite such possible discrepancy, the value of the analysis should not be undermined as the linguistic patterns which are deemed to contribute to the emergence of the personal identities are pointed out clearly and systematically in the analysis (Locher & Hoffmann 2006, p.78).

In the following discussion, extracts of the request e-mails will be used to illustrate how the identities were constructed. For reasons of confidentiality, the names of the organizations, people, places and activities were not real ones. However, the content and language are not changed to retain the highest possible authenticity of the discourse.

Results and Discussion

In the paragraphs that follow, the strategies the teachers employed in putting themselves in an advantageous position in relation to promotion and pay rises will be illustrated. The accompanying discussion will relate the identities thus constructed to a particular section of the teachers’ appraisal report used by the Education Bureau of Hong Kong government in evaluating individual teachers’ performance annually.

Constructing the identity of a responsible, hardworking member

The following aspects of the transitivity of the clauses found in the members’ e-mails reflect how they constructed the identity of a responsible, hardworking member through their request e-mail discourse –

- (i) they used predominantly the active voice with ‘I’ as the Actor in those clauses meant to tell others what they had been, were, or would be responsible for;
- (ii) they included the Agent of the process where an exclusion of it could well be the choice; and
- (iii) they chose particular material actional processes which conveyed a stronger “sense of dynamic activity” (Fairclough 1993, p. 89).

The role of each of the above strategies in the construction of the identity of a responsible, hardworking member is discussed below.

The use of the active and passive voice

The active voice was used strategically. It was used by the e-mail authors in mentioning to their peers what they had done, were doing, or would do. Thirty-nine of the forty-one clauses meant to let the recipients know their duties were written in the active voice with 'I' as the Actor of the clauses. Such choice of voice echoes the findings of Ng's (2003) study of e-mail discourse. Such choice should, as argued below, also perform another function – constructing the identity of a responsible, hardworking member. In the following extract the sender was trying to arrange for a training session on the operation of the language laboratory for the recipients, and to get them to do some preparation for the session. She used altogether four such active clauses. In other words, the sender mentioned to the peers four times in the same e-mail what her duties included –

Extract 1 (clauses in bold refer to the sender's duties, my emphasis)

I have just talked to Mr. Yeung and he suggested Friday afternoon for our briefing session on the use of the Language Lab. I don't know if it is okay with the Maths teachers but **I have checked the "meeting schedule"** in our black teacher's folder, there shouldn't be any meetings for the Maths or English teachers. ...

Actually, everyone should have got a user's manual for using that lab. If you haven't got one, let me know and **I will make a copy for you**. From the manual, we should be able to figure out the basic functions of the platform (Infinity V) used in that room.

Then we can focus on how to run those activities in the briefing session. Please share with us teaching ideas in the Lang Lab so **I can get Mr. Yeung prepared for the briefing**. Thanks for your attention.

The sender used the active voice in the four highlighted clauses to tell her peers what she had done and would do in relation to the use of the language laboratory. It is necessary to clarify here that using the active voice is not the institution's convention (as it may be argued that it should be). As can be seen from this same e-mail and other e-mails, she (and the other members) did use the passive voice from time to time. For example, in this same e-mail, the sender wrote, in the passive, "From the manual, we should be able to figure out the basic functions of the platform (Infinity V) **used** in that room". She could have written these clauses as "From the manual, we should be able to figure out the basic functions of the platform (Infinity V) **that we want to use** in that room", or in a number of other ways in the active voice. In the following extract, the same member described what the minor staff of the school had done – put the books into a room and securely locked them up -- in the passive voice. It shows that using the active construction is not the overall style of this e-mail author, she just chose to do so –

Extract 2

The "bargain" bookshop has already sent the books to us and they **are now securely stored** at the back of Rm 309. (my emphasis).

She could have made the Agent ('the school's minor staff') of the Process ('stored')

explicit using the active voice as in “... and the school’s minor staff has stored them at the back of Rm 309”.

Such strategic, differential choice of voices was also observed in other members’ e-mails. The authors of the following two extracts used the active voice with ‘I’ as the Actor in two clauses—

Extract 3

This year, I FORCE all my BAND, CHOIR and MUSIC CLUB committees to speak in English... (original emphasis)

Extract 4

Last year, I did some worksheets, games and song [*sic*] for Halloween.

Similar to the sender of Extract 2, other members of the group also used the passive construction in their clauses, as the following extracts show –

Extract 5

If it’s possible, can it be arranged on Friday after school?

Extract 6

Assessment can be done by the number of articles they read ...

From the clauses written in the active or the passive voice, we can see that the e-mails authors did show a strategic pattern in their choice of voices. It is, when they were telling their peers what their own duties or commitments had been, were or would be, they chose the active voice with ‘I’ as the subject (Extracts 1, 3 and 4); whereas when they were telling their peers what others’ duties or commitments had been, were or would be, they chose the passive voice (Extracts 2, 5 and 6). Such a marked difference in the choice of voices strongly suggests that the members were deliberate in their choice. It leaves us with the question of why they made the choice the way they had.

All the authors of the e-mails analyzed in the present paper were subordinates of the two Heads of Department (HODs thereafter). The two HODs assessed their performance throughout the year and completed an appraisal report for each one of them at the end of the academic year. The report formed the basis on which decision on their promotion and annual salary increment was made by the Education Bureau and Civil Service Bureau (Burns 2004, p.209). The assessment of the subordinates (and actually each one of the teachers serving in the public schools in Hong Kong) was made in relation to a number of areas which, according to Hilderbrand and Grindle (1997, p.45), form the “criteria for admission and advancement in public sector careers”. The excerpt of the appraisal report on the next page shows eight such areas.

A total of eight core competencies were assessed. One of them, core competency (f) – ACCEPTANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY – was specifically about the appraisees’ willingness to seek and accept responsibility. Rating on this particular core competency

would then be determined by how much responsibility the members were willing to seek and accept throughout the appraisal period (taken to be one academic year in the school setting) which was “a continuous and ongoing process” (Civil Service Bureau, 2003). For an individual teacher member, one channel to let others know that they were responsible was through internal e-mails. This brings out the issue of participants of this particular discursive event – the use of e-mails.

Excerpt 1: Appraisal report of HKSAR civil servants – core competencies

Core Competencies	
(a) JUDGEMENT	Able to comprehend problems and make proper analysis and decision.
(b) PLANNING AND ORGANISATION OF WORK	Plans and organises work effectively; observes priorities and maintains quality.
(c) LEADERSHIP AND STAFF MANAGEMENT	Sets standards, monitors, advises and motivates team members effectively. Leads a team effectively.
(d) TEAMWORK	Collaborates with team members and other teams.
(e) DRIVE AND DETERMINATION	Demonstrates wholehearted application to work; carries tasks through to the end.
(f) ACCEPTANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY	Seeks and readily accepts responsibility.
(g) PERFORMANCE UNDER PRESSURE	Copes with work extremely well under pressure.
(h) INTERPERSONAL SKILLS	Sensitive to other people’s feelings; tactful; understanding of personal problems; earns great respect.

The sender appeared to address only the designated recipients (as defined by the salutation like *Dear Polly*) in the e-mails. However, as mentioned earlier, every single e-mail sent by every single member of this group would eventually make its way to every other member of the same group. That is, not only the designated recipients of the e-mail would receive the message, but also those who were not addressed. In other words, the e-mail authors “anticipate not only the ‘addresses’ (those directly addressed), but also ‘hearers’ (those not addressed directly, but assumed to be part of audience)” (Fairclough 1992, p. 79). The latter group of recipients (the hearers) would also receive and even read the message. That is, when a member was communicating with his or her peers through the e-group platform, the two HODs would be aware of such communicative act and the message conveyed in the act. This is always the case as the authors opened the e-mail with ‘Dear All’ in most of their e-mails which were meant to be addressed to the peers only. The participants of the discursive event would therefore include others who were not directly addressed. While detailing their duties, responsibilities, and commitments in the e-mails addressed to their peers, and thereby constructing their identity of a

responsible, hardworking teacher member, the authors were at the same time relaying the same information to, and constructing the same identity right before their leaders. This could have some effect on the leaders' appraisal of the authors' performance regarding core competency (f) – acceptance of responsibility.

So, taking into account altogether the way the active and passive voices were used, the participants of the discursive event, and the wider social effect of the discursive event, it is argued that the senders deliberately chose to use the active voice with 'I' as the Actor of the clauses in order to construct the identity of a responsible, hardworking member for themselves. In addition, such identity construction was witnessed by the two HODs. The argument that the e-mail authors were constructing desirable identities through e-mails to which the HODs had access is supported by Graham (2007, p.750) who maintains that "... one must be aware of a multi-faceted audience and should tailor postings to acknowledge *all* recipients – both the one(s) to whom you are responding directly as well as other readers" (original emphasis).

The inclusion of Agent in clauses

Another transitivity element which the senders drew upon in constructing the identity of a responsible, hardworking member is the inclusion of Agent in the clauses. Some clauses as the following three extracts show included the Medium, Process and Agent, while the same semantic meaning could have been expressed had the Agent been excluded (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Extract	Original (Agent included)	Possible substitute (Agent excluded)
7	I have planned to have my choir practice on Friday afternoons and also the band practice for the coming competition and National Day performance.	My choir and band plan to have their practice on Friday afternoons for the coming ...
8	I'll have practice with the band and choir Monday after school ...	The band and choir will have their practice Monday after school...
9	I can let them know each other and ...	They can get to know each other and ...

As can be seen from Extracts 7 to 9 above, the senders foregrounded the Agent of the Process in the clause when the senders were the Agent themselves. This foregrounding, like the use of the active voice, conveys a clear message to the recipients that the senders themselves were responsible for the Process or the act performed. In clauses where the Agent was excluded, though the Process could be made as explicit, only the Medium (i.e. *My choir and band*, *The band and choir*, and *They*) was foregrounded, the responsibility or involvement of the senders was not. It follows that the inclusion of the Agent could then, like the use of the active voice, serve two purposes: (1) to construct the identity of a responsible, hardworking member of the group; and (2) to benefit the senders themselves in relation to the performance appraisal to be done by their superiors.

The use of particular material actional process

The way the Process was used as one of the resources by the senders in constructing their identity will now be discussed. The identity of a responsible member was further strengthened when the use of the active voice was coupled with the choice of the particular material actional process which conveyed a stronger “sense of dynamic activity” (Fairclough 1993, p.89). In Extract 1 above, the sender could have used other process types to express the same semantic content, conveyed in the clauses written in the active voice having ‘I’ as the subject, for example (processes highlighted) –

	Original	Possible substitutes
1	I have just talked to Mr. X ...	I have just had a talk/discussion with Mr. X ...
2	... but I have checked the ‘meeting schedule’ in our black teacher’s folder, there shouldn’t be any meetings but I found that, according to the ‘meeting schedule’ in our black teacher’s folder, there shouldn’t be any meetings ...
3	..., let me know and I will make a copy to you	..., let me know and I will give a copy to you. (Though both ‘give’ and ‘make’ are material actional process, ‘make’ implies more work is involved than ‘give’)
4	... in the Lang Lab so I can get Mr. X in the Lang Lab so I can ask Mr. X to prepare for the briefing

The possible substitutes would have worked less effectively in constructing the identity since they either included a process type other than the material/behavioral (i.e. actional) process (examples 1, 2 and 4) or a material process which did not involve as much action and effort as the original one (example 3), or in Fairclough’s (1993: 89) term, it conveyed a weaker “sense of dynamic activity”. Using the material actional processes as in the four clauses in Extract 1, the senders conveyed explicitly the action they performed, and did so in a way which implied more work than otherwise stated, and thus making their contribution more obvious. It helped them to construct and strengthen their identity of a responsible, hardworking member of the group.

Constructing the identity of a member with authority and power

A combination of direct and indirect request strategies, with reference to the directness of requests (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), was observed in the requests made by the subordinates among themselves. As Table 1 below shows, more of the requests were phrased with a high directness as reflected from the mood used (Halliday, 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) – most of the requests had an indicative declarative mood or imperative mood, only a small fraction had an indicative interrogative mood.

Table 1: Mood in peer requests

Mood	No. of requests
Indicative	

Declarative	21
Interrogative	10
Imperative	23

Among the 54 requests made by the teachers in their e-mails to the peers, 44 of them were in either declarative or imperative mood. And among the 21 declarative clauses, ten of them were written in the disguise of a suggestion; three as a Want Statement; four with deontic modality denoting obligation ‘should’, and two with modality denoting permission ‘can’; one unmodalized and unhedged; and one written as a conditional. So, except for the ten requests written as a Suggestory Formula, the other 11 all belonged to the Direct request category under the Blum-Kulka et al’s (1989) scale of directness.

Two figures are worth our special attention: the one for direct declarative clauses (11 in number or 20.4%) and imperative clauses (23 in number or 42.6%). Among the 11 direct declarative clauses, one of them was unmodalized which, according to White (1988), such a clause is not open for negotiation. Coupled with the use of the modality denoting obligation in four other declarative clauses, we can see that the senders were requesting their peers as if they were in the position of a leader. The following three extracts show how the deontic modality was used in phrasing the requests –

Extract 10

After the report writing, **we should work on the extensive reading** to build up their vocab on health problems, followed by dictation. (my emphasis)

Extract 11

I will try my very best to get them done within this week. **We should start getting the materials ready for photocopying.** (my emphasis)

Extract 12

... just to remind you that the kids are supposed to check up the Chinese meaning of the underlined words or phrases and **we should have quiz or dictation on those with them** in order to strengthen their memory. (my emphasis)

Modality signaling obligation, or deontic modality, was used in the above three extracts by the members to indicate to the peers what their duties were: “... we **should** work on the extensive reading ... dictation”; “We **should** start getting the materials...”; “... we **should** have quiz or dictation on those ...”. The use of such obligatory modality helps to construct the identity of a member with the authority and power who is in a position to specify what others should do.

Apart from direct declaratives, imperative clauses were used extensively by the senders in their request e-mails to peers – the imperative mood appeared in over half of the lateral requests (23 imperatives in 54 requests). The following extracts show how imperative clauses were used as requests in lateral e-mails. In Extract 13, the sender was asking her peers to do a total of four tasks in relation to the distribution of books to students.

Extract 13

Some of the books are out of stock and there might be some missing orders. **Please double check what is actually there with the order list** you have got. **Distribute the books to the kids** and **make sure they pay accordingly**. We don't want to over-charge them. **Please also inform them** that there won't be any re-order for those missing orders. (my emphasis)

The sender was the one coordinating the book sale activity. Upon receipt of the books, she started to organize the distribution of the books to the students through the English teachers. She requested them to do a number of things – double check what books they had, distribute the books, and inform students of the re-order arrangement. The sender was being so direct that she was like giving orders instead of making requests. This could be attributed to her construction of the identity of a member with the authority and power to get others to act.

So, from the directness, and mood and modality of the clauses functioning as requests, it can be argued that the members of the group were trying to construct for themselves the identity of a member with authority and power, as if they were the leader (an undesignated one, though).

Such argument is supported when we once again take into account the appraisal conducted by the HODs. Excerpt 1 of the appraisal report shows that one of the core competencies to be assessed is the appraisees' leadership and staff management (core competency c). All the other teachers (the subordinates) were in the same situation regarding promotion prospect. Keen competition was going on among the teachers in the English Department and other departments of the same school, and those of other government schools in the territory. Rated high on leadership and staff management would then put the teachers in a more advantageous position than others.

The above findings first, demonstrate the constitutive effect of discourse (Fairclough, 1992) – the construction of personal identities in this case; and second, illustrate how two of the seven “building tasks of language” (Gee 2005, p. 11) – identities and politics – can be accomplished through request e-mail discourse. Politics, according to Gee (2005, p.2), refers to how “social goods are thought about, argued over, and distributed in society”. And “social goods” refers to “anything that a group of people believes to be a source of power, status, value, or worth” (ibid). In this paper, the social goods involved were promotion prospects and pay rises, and the discussion has illustrated how the members of the group, through their discourse, achieved their political aims – putting themselves in an advantageous position in relation to promotion and pay rises.

However, the study could improve on its methodology and thus the generalizability of the findings if a larger corpus of request e-mails could be obtained so that statistical tests could be employed to verify the claims made in the paper. The corpus should include on the one hand a larger number of request e-mails collected from the same group of teachers and the teachers of the education institute to which the group of teachers

belongs, and on the other from professionals other than teachers.

Conclusion

In this paper, the ways the teachers strategically made use of the resources available in the grammar of the English language – transitivity, mood and modality – in constructing identities through request e-mail discourse have been discussed. The identities constructed, namely that of a responsible, hardworking member of the group, and a member with authority and power, have been shown to be important to the teachers as far as promotion and pay rises were concerned.

It is hoped that the findings could achieve three aims. First, it could contribute to a deeper understanding of the constitutive effect of discourse, as reflected from the construction of identities through request e-mail discourse discussed in the paper. Second, it could illustrate how such effect could be made use of by discourse producers in order to achieve both their communicative and political aims. Lastly, by combining the two preceding aims, it could enhance our e-mail communication competency, in terms of the discourse strategies we could employ, in the workplace.

References

- Bargiela-Cahiappini, F., & Harris, S. (1996). Requests and status in business correspondence. *Journal of Pragmatics*. 28(5), 635-662.
- Baron, N. S. (1998). Letters by phone or speech by other means: The linguistics of email. *Language & Communication*. 18(2), 133-170.
- Baron, N. S. (2000). *Alphabet to email: How written English evolved and where it's heading*. New York: Routledge.
- Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., & Kasper, G. (eds.). (1989). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Burns, J. (2004). *Government capacity and the Hong Kong civil service*. Hong Kong: Oxford.
- Civil Service Bureau. (2003). *Civil service personnel statistics* (p.48). (Online) Retrieved 2 November 2007, from <http://www.csb.gov.hk/hkgcsb/hrm/e-hrm-guide/pm>
- Coupland, N. (1985). "Hark, hark, the lark": Social motivations for phonological style-shifting. *Language and Communication*. 5(3), 153-171.
- do Carmo, M. (in press). E-mail messaging in the corporate sector: tensions between technological affordances and rapport management. In C. Candlin & S. Sarangi

(Eds.), *Handbook of applied linguistics, Volume 3: Communication in the professions and organisations*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Fairclough, N. (1993). Critical discourse analysis and the marketization of public discourse: The universities. *Discourse and Society*. 4(2), 133-168.

Gee, J. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. New York: Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1971). *Relations in public*. Hamondsworth: Penguin.

Goldner, M. (2006). Using the internet and email for health purposes: The impact of health status. *Social Science Quarterly*. 87(3), 690-710.

Graham, S. (2007). Disagreeing to agree: Conflict, (im)politeness and identity in a computer-mediated community. *Journal of pragmatics*. 39(4), 742-759.

Gumperz, J., & Cook-Gumperz, J. (1982). Introduction: Language and the communication of social identity. In J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Language and social identity* (pp. 1-21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar*, 2nd edition. London: E. Arnold.

Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar*, (3rd ed.). London: Arnold.

Hilderbrand, M., & Grindle, M. (1997). Building sustainable capacity in the public sector: What can be done? In M. Grindle (Ed.), *Getting good government: Capacity building in the public sectors of developing countries* (pp. 45). Boston: Harvard University Press.

Kankaanranta, A. (2006). "Hej Seppo, could you pls comment on this!"— Internal email communication in lingua franca English in a multinational company. *Business Communication Quarterly*. 69(2), 216-225.

Kong, K. (2006). Accounts as a politeness strategy in the internal directive documents of a business firm in Hong Kong. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*. 16(1), 77-101.

Lee, C. (2003). Politeness and e-mail discourse: A study on the use of linguistic forms of politeness by Chinese learners of English. *Proceedings of "Knowledge & Discourse: Speculating on Disciplinary Futures", 2nd International Conference*. Hong Kong, 25-29 June 2002.

- Lee, C. (2004a). Request strategy and second language acquisition. *Proceedings of CLaSIC 2004*, Singapore, 1 – 3 December 2004, pp. 420 – 437.
- Lee, C. (2004b). Written requests in emails sent by adult Chinese learners of English. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*. 17(1), 58-72.
- Locher, M. A., & Hoffmann, S. (2006). The emergence of the identity of a fictional expert advice-giver in an American Internet advice column. *Text & Talk*. 26(1), 69-106.
- Locher, M. A., & Watts, R. J. (2005). Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research*. 1(1), 9-33.
- McCabe, A. (2004). Mood and modality in Spanish and English history textbooks: The construction of authority. *Text*. 24(1), 1-29.
- Ng, Y. K. (2003). A discourse analysis of e-mail messages in a Malaysian business community. *GEMA Online™ Journal of Language Studies*, 3(1), 1-10.
- Nickerson, C. (1999). The use of English in electronic mail in a multinational corporation. In F. Bargiela-Chiappini Francesca & C. Nickerson, (Eds.), *Writing business: Genres, media and discourse* (pp. 35-56). Harlow, UK; New York: Longman.
- Nickerson, C. (2000) *Playing the corporate language game – An investigation of the genres and discourse strategies in English used by Dutch writers working in multinational corporations*, Vol. 15. Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi.
- Patrona, M. (2005). Speaking authoritatively: On the modality and factuality of expert talk in Greek television studio discussion programs. *Text*. 25(2), 233-267.
- Scott, J., & Jackson, S. (1983). Strategy and structure in conversational influence attempts. *Communication Monographs*. 50(4), 285-304.
- Simon, B. (2004). *Identity in modern society: A social psychological perspective*. UK: Blackwell
- Tracy, K. (2002). *Everyday talk: Building and reflecting identities*. New York: Guilford.
- Virtanen, T., & Maricic, I. (2000) Queries on the Linguist List: A move-structure analysis of a computer-mediated genre. In T. Virtanen & I. Marcic (Eds.), *Perspectives on discourse. Proceedings from the 1998 and 1999 Discourse Symposia at Vaxjo University*. Vaxjo: Vaxjo University Press.
- White, P. (1998) *Towards a grammar of power and solidarity – developments in the*

linguistics of evaluation, inter-subjectivity, and ideological position. Paper presented at the 10th Euro-international Systemic Functional Workshop. The University of Liverpool, 22-25 July 1998.

Wimmer, A. (2002). *Nationalist exclusion and ethnic conflict – Shadows of modernity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

About the author

Victor Ho is a Ph.D student in linguistics at the Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University. He is currently working as a Research Associate at the Language Centre, Hong Kong Baptist University.