PIPE: Pragmatics and Interaction in Professional Emails

Faculty of Wellbeing Education and Language Studies (WELS)

Call for doctoral projects starting in October 2025

The Open University

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Project description

School

Languages and Applied Linguistics

Members

Name	Website	Email address
Dr Rachele De Felice	https://www.open.ac.uk/people/rf2243	Rachele.de-felice@open.ac.uk
Dr Caroline Tagg	https://www.open.ac.uk/people/ct7565	caroline.tagg@open.ac.uk
Dr Prithvi Shrestha	https://www.open.ac.uk/people/pns52	Prithvi.shrestha@open.ac.uk
Dr Andrew Gargett	https://www.open.ac.uk/people/ag24345	Andrew.gargett@open.ac.uk

Aim

The aim of this project is to gain a thorough understanding of how individuals use language in workplace communication to project competence, manage relationships, and display professional identities. It makes use of large datasets of publicly available email correspondence (in particular from the Hillary Clinton and the Anthony Fauci collections), which include rich information about the senders and recipients of the messages and the relationships among them, to

explore issues such as leadership construction, problem-solving, politeness, and hierarchy.

Methodology

This study is grounded in corpus linguistics and pragmatics. It involves basic programming and text manipulation techniques alongside corpus linguistics analysis of recurrent phrases, pragmatic functions, and longer stretches of discourse. It also brings in theoretical insights from both linguistics (pragmatics, discourse analysis) and organizational studies, in particular leadership studies.

Contribution

The project's contributions are two-pronged. The corpus linguistics research at its core will advance our understanding of workplace email communication, and broaden current notions of pragmatics, politeness, and interaction by assessing how applicable they are to this particular domain of communication. It also adds to our knowledge of how language is used to construct different identities. Any corpus resources that are developed in the course of the project can be made freely available to the research community. At the same time, by exploring the use of communicative strategies in professional environments, the project can contribute to ongoing work on organisational and leadership discourse. It can provide valuable practical insights and case studies for the development of those entering the workforce for the first time, or joining from different workplace cultures, helping them overcome potential communicative barriers.

PhD project

The PhD project would focus on any of the strands of research of the overarching project. It can have either a focus on corpus development and structure analysis, or on a specific linguistic question such as a particular pragmatic phenomenon (one or two speech acts, polite words, agreement and disagreement). Alternatively, it can have a stronger slant towards organizational discourse, for example addressing leadership construction either in one of the 'recognised' leaders in the dataset(s) – Clinton, Fauci – or other senior members of the workplace.

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