The Use of Complimentary Closings in E-mail: American English Examples

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This paper attempts to address the lack of clear stylistic guidelines for non-native speakers of English writing e-mails by focusing on the particular problem of closings. To assist teachers who are asked to guide students on this issue, the paper examines the complimentary closings that 175 native speakers of American English used in 532 unique e-mails to the author. Patterns are viewed in relation to the sender's gender, age, and social distance to the recipient, as well as other factors. No closing at all was used in more than half of the e-mails studied, but closings did appear to depend on the purpose of the e-mail and the personal distance between sender and recipient. The implications of these findings for ESL teachers and students are considered.

Introduction

ver the past ten years or so, technology has radically changed the way people all around the world communicate, as e-mail has become available and even ubiquitous in almost every developed country. But e-mail presents an interesting pragmatic paradox that can be very difficult for English as a Second Language (ESL) students to understand. As Baron (1998: 147) points out, "email tends to use more casual lexicon, to be less carefully edited, and to assume a greater degree of familiarity with the interlocutor." On the other hand, it is still a written form of communication that can be saved, copied or forwarded, making it more formal than spoken language.

As an ESL teacher focusing on Business English courses, the author has seen students struggle to balance these contradicting features and find the appropriate tone and style to use for e-mail, even at advanced levels of communicative competence. For example, her students in Business Writing courses have expressed a particular desire for e-mails to sound professional, since this form of communication is used so frequently in business. Some students who work in fields where they have clients or customers in the United States have particularly indicated that they feel they are more likely to exchange e-mail with native speakers of English than they are to call them on the telephone because of the time

difference and the expense of long-distance calls. This puts the author and other ESL teachers in the position of being asked to guide students in learning the correct style for e-mail.

There are many pragmatic considerations in composing an e-mail, far too many to address in a single study. One feature the author has observed a variety of non-native speakers of English struggling with or using awkwardly in e-mail is the complimentary closing. This is a seemingly innocuous polite word or phrase as a formulaic "goodbye", a preclosing move at the bottom of a letter or e-mail, just before the signature. But on closer examination, we realize that ESL books about business writing such as Bartell (1995) and Geffner (1998) instruct students to use closings such as "Yours truly" or "Sincerely yours" in letters, which are rarely used in e-mail. What complimentary closings do native speakers of English use in their e-mails? This would be valuable information for our students as they learn the accepted formulas of business communication in English.

Although there are a multitude of references available for students on the tone and style of letters, only a few such manuals exist for e-mail. The manuals that exist are based on the authors' opinions of appropriate style rather than empirical data. Even then, most manuals ignore the complimentary closing. An example of this is Flynn and Flynn (1998), which gives considerable attention to both the salutation line of the e-mail and the way senders present their names, but makes no mention of which complimentary close to use, if any. Those that do address the complimentary close (Angell & Heslop 1994, cited in Crystal 2001: 106) reject the standard closings of letters such as "Yours sincerely" without comment and recommend only one-word closings, such as "Thanks" or "Best". But again, these recommendations are not based on empirical data. Thus, one of the most fundamental parts of letters, the complimentary closing, which is always covered in business writing courses, receives little attention in style manuals.

The first place to begin to address this void is to determine what native speakers of English, and American English in particular, do to navigate this pragmatic quandary, so that we can provide models for ESL students to use. Timmis (2002) found that ESL students do want "to conform to native speaker norms, and this desire is not necessarily restricted to those students who use, or anticipate using English primarily with native speakers" (p. 248). There is a long history of studying native speaker norms in developing guidelines for ESL students learning the pragmatic features of English. Wolfson (1983:) describes her study of complimenting as "the sort of information needed by nonnative speakers if they are to interact successfully in American society" (p. 82). In a similar vein, Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992) studied closing moves in conversations between academic advisors and students to understand native speaker norms in that context. But while these and other studies have

considered pragmatics in the spoken domain, little work has been done with pragmatics in electronic discourse.

Very little is available in the literature to evaluate native speaker norms in electronic discourse in general or e-mail in particular. Most of the studies of electronic discourse published to date focus on either its uses or its linguistic and stylistic features (e.g. Baron 1998; Dutra 2000), without directly addressing native speaker norms or comparing native and non-native speakers of English. The same holds true if we consider just studies of e-mail, a subset of electronic discourse. Many of the studies in this area focus on the uses of e-mail in the classroom and in society in general (e.g. Adrian 2002; Lapp 2000; Liaw & Johnson 2001). There is a small but growing body of research on more general features of e-mail. For example, in his chapter on the language of e-mail, Crystal (2001) cites Naughton's (1999) study of e-mail headers, Gains' (1998) study of e-mail greetings and text features, and McCormick & McCormick's (1992) study of the content of undergraduates' e-mails. Even considering these few studies, there is still very little detailed research on any one specific email feature, including the subject of e-mail closings, as addressed in this paper.

Among the few studies which investigate e-mail features is Yongyan's (2000) qualitative study of an undetermined number of e-mails she received. She notes that her e-mails follow the formula of traditional letters by having a pre-closing move (which we are calling a complimentary close) followed by an identification move, i.e. the sender's name or other identifying information. But in elaborating the variety of pre-closing moves in her sample, she also points out that e-mail writers use a far more varied set of pre-close moves than letter writers do.

Another study that considers pre-closing moves is Crystal (2001) who found that 80% of the messages he studied included both a pre-closing move and an identification move, while just 20% used only the identification. He observes this from 500 personal e-mails that he received, but it is unfortunate that he does not distinguish between native and nonnative speakers of English as senders. He does consider the age of his correspondents, and he reports that there was "no difference between old and young in their predilection for [using pre-closing] formulae" (p. 103), but he notes that the pre-closing used depends on the author's age. Crystal does not provide much quantitative data, but he does observe that "the influence of traditional letter-writing is evident in the over-whelming tendency to place each element on a separate line, usually spaced away from the message body."

The comparison of traditional letters against e-mails has also been picked up in other small studies. Grzega (1999) studied e-mails and traditional letters written in German and English by 20 native speakers of German at the University of Eichstätt. For mine of the informants, "clear differences can be seen" (p. 12) between the openings and closings used

in e-mails compared to those used in letters. Grzega felt that there was not enough consistency in the messages by the other eleven informants to judge whether they were similar or not – each person used a variety of openings and closings in each medium.

A slightly larger study considering e-mail closings is described by Lan (2000), who compared 76 e-mails written to her in Hong Kong with 62 e-mails in a corpus gathered by Gains (1998, cited in Lan 2000) in the United Kingdom. Although all messages were in English, less than half of the Hong Kong messages were from native speakers of English, while all of the UK messages were from native speakers of English. Lan found that the e-mails in the UK sample used the sender's name only or no closing at all 57.9% of the time, "(Best) regards/wishes" 26.4% of the time, and "Thank you" only 11.8% of the time. The e-mails in her Hong Kong sample had a very different distribution of closings, with 40% using "Thank you," but the lack of differentiation of native languages makes it difficult to make any direct comparison.

The limited number of studies that consider the complimentary close in e-mail, combined with the small sample sizes and/or lack of consideration of native language in most of these studies, underlines the void in this area of research. Crystal (2001) has shown us that most of his messages include a complimentary close, but does not detail the closings used. Lan (2000) goes a little further and finds that the closings used by a group of native speakers of English were different from those used by a group of mixed native and non-native speakers of English.

In all of these studies, a variety of closings has been observed but they have not been systematically studied to effectively determine native speaker norms. If we are to guide ESL students in developing pragmatic competence in the complimentary close for e-mail, we need to have an understanding of how native speakers of English handle this feature. Such an understanding must be based on observed data, not opinion, and must be developed systematically. This study attempts to begin to consider this problem.

Methodology

We see that, of the studies that specifically address closings, one (Lan 2000) considers native speakers of English separately but has a very small sample size, while all the other studies find a variety of closings. With this background in mind, this study will examine the complimentary closings used in e-mails written by native speakers of English and will attempt to draw conclusions about which closings are most frequently used, in hopes of informing ESL teachers who are asked to guide students in this area. We will also consider whether features of a particular e-mail, such as its purpose or the sender's gender, influence the closings that are used.

The raw data set for this study consisted of all of the e-mails received by the author from November 1, 2001 through February 15, 2002, all in English. The end date of this period was driven by writing deadlines, and the start date was chosen rather arbitrarily by working backwards to find a sample of at least 2,000 e-mails and a first-day-of-the-month date for beginning. The author saves 100% of e-mails received for at least six months for archiving purposes, so this was a complete set, not just a selection of messages deemed worth saving. While this is admittedly a limited population chosen for convenience, the purpose of this study is to make a first attempt in an area that has not been studied in detail, and to begin to gather preliminary information which may help ESL teachers guide their students in writing e-mails. This initial work is not intended to be definitive or even generalizable, but if it reveals nascent patterns in this particular sample, then it may be worthwhile to pursue further research to see if similar patterns exist in wider populations including many more correspondents.

This data set contained more than 2,400 e-mails, including one-to-one business and personal e-mails, one-to-many e-mails to listservs and groups, and one-to-many announcements and advertisements. The only e-mails that were deleted from this set were e-newsletters that had no personal message component and sales e-mails or announcements that had no personal message, analogous to paper flyers. Deleting these items left 1,915 e-mails from 408 different senders.

Permission to use the e-mail was sought from all senders, and they were also asked their gender, native language, and age (within broad ranges). Any e-mails from senders less than 18 years old were immediately removed from consideration because of privacy and permission issues for minors. Of the 408 people queried, only 2 explicitly declined to give permission and another was under 18 years old. In this age of enormous quantities of e-mail, as well as easy and frequent e-mail address changes, it is not surprising that 43% of those asked for permission never responded at all. Everyone who responded to give permission also provided the personal data requested. People were not told exactly what feature of their e-mails would be studied, and the self-selection involved in responding to a request for permission for messages to be used is not likely to be related to the closings used, since the request was made at least several weeks after the e-mails were composed. Ultimately, permission and personal data were received from 229 people. Of these, 175 people identified themselves as native speakers of American English.

When the e-mail from these 175 people was considered, it became clear that a few people who work closely with the author were responsible for a significant number of messages. To balance the number of e-mails from each respondent and avoid having most of the data come from a very small number of people, only the 10 most recent messages from each respondent were retained. This number of e-mails to save was

chosen somewhat arbitrarily, but was based on reviewing the number of messages from all senders, and choosing an upper limit that would be similar to the number of e-mails received from other senders. The most recent 10 e-mails were selected simply because the early part of the time period of the study included several holidays. By choosing the later e-mails, the closings were less likely to have an artificially high number of holiday greetings. This left a final data set of 532 messages from 175 unique individuals.

Along with the complimentary closing (or lack of one), the following information was recorded for each message in the data set: (a) sender's gender, (b) sender's age range, (c) destination of the e-mail, (d) purpose of the e-mail, (e) social distance and direction of the sender to the main recipient, and (f) personal distance between the sender and the main recipient. The complimentary closings fell into eleven main categories, with only a small number falling outside of these types. The totals for each type of closing are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Complimentary Closings in E-mail

No closing	51%	n=271
"Thanks"	22%	119
"Thank you"	6%	30
"Regards"	6%	30
"Best" / "All the best"	5%	25
Holiday greeting	1%	7
Other form of thanks	1%	6
"Love"	1%	6
Reference to the future	1%	6
"Take care"	1%	6
"Sincerely"	1%	6
All others	4%	20

Some of these categories may require explanation. For example, this data was collected between November and February, so holiday greetings such as *Happy Thanksgiving*, *Happy New Year*, and even *I hope your Valentine's Day is a happy one!* appeared in the data set. *Thanks* was count-

ed as being separate from *Thank you* because the latter is more formal and therefore may present a different pattern of usage. "Other forms of thanks" did not occur often, but include magnified expressions such as *Many, many thanks* and also *Thanks in advance*, which is sometimes seen when requesting information or an opinion – something that places a burden on the recipient. Reference to the future included *See you soon*, *See you in class, Hope to hear from you soon* and other similar expressions of anticipated meetings or communication.

Finally, the "All others" category is a catch-all for a wide variety of idiosyncratic closings. Interesting examples included HTH, shorthand for Hope that helps; TTFN, meaning Ta Ta for now, mimicking a casual British closing; and En paz, Spanish for in Peace, even though the sender was a native speaker of American English living in an American community. More mundane closings also fit this category, such as Your friend, a somewhat old-fashioned closing from informal letters between friends.

Results

One of the most striking things about this data is that no closing at all was used 51% of the time. This is far more than either Crystal (2001: 102) or Lan (2000: 26) reported, and is somewhat contrary to the author's intuition that few people would be likely to completely omit the complimentary closing in e-mail. We can also note that *Thanks* was used more than 3 times as frequently as *Thank you* was, while *Sincerely*, a standard closing in letters, was used in only 1% of the e-mails.

Next we consider the other features of the e-mail messages. The data on the sender's characteristics, the destination and the purpose of the messages is summarized in Table 2.

While there were more e-mails from men than from women, the 60%/40% split is not surprising given the fact that the author works in Information Technology, a field that Wired News calls "the industry without women" (Mayfield 2001). The large percentage of e-mails destined for a list or an alias also reflects the typical mix that someone who works in technology and subscribes to several lists receives, and these e-mails are also responsible for the large percentage of e-mails sent to a "stranger" (45%), since people are rarely personally acquainted with all of the dozens or hundreds of subscribers to a list.

The data becomes more interesting when we look at the distribution of closings with respect to other factors. Because of the large volume of data, the complete cross-reference of closings against other factors is reserved for Appendix 1, but several patterns seem to emerge, and are worthy of comment. For example, we saw in Table 1 that most of the messages used no closing, and we find that this pattern is true across all of the purposes of e-mail except asking for help or information, where "Thanks" is used more than any other closing. In all other purposes of e-mail, the complimentary closing is omitted at least twice as often as any

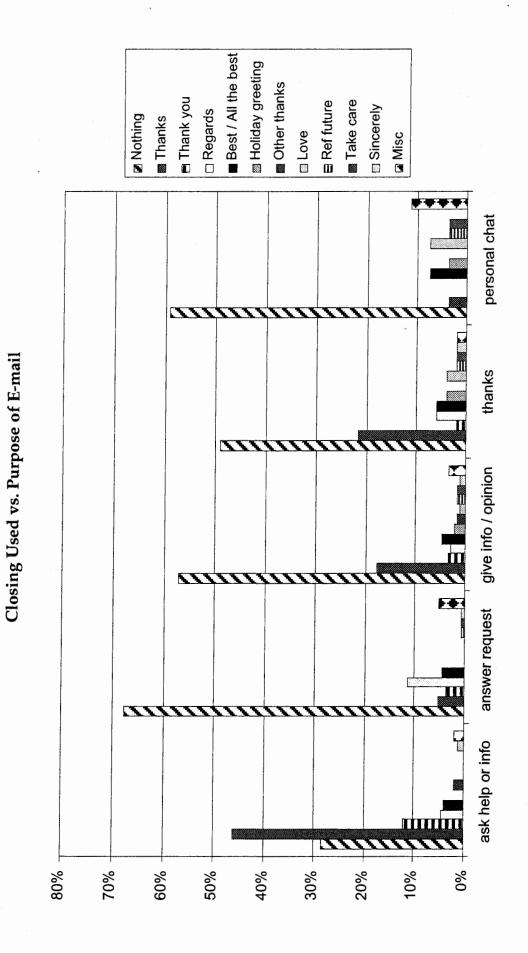
closing is used. Figure 1 illustrates this striking difference.

Table 2 Characteristics

Characteristics of Senders and E-mails (n=532)								
Gender Purpose								
Male	n=321	60%	Request help or information	152	29%			
Female	211	40%	Answer request for help or info	133	25%			
			Information or opinion	169	32%			
Age			Appreciation	51	10%			
18-25	23	4%	Personal casual topic	27	5%			
26-35	147	28%						
36-45	144	27%	Social status					
46-55	142	27%	Peers	369	69%			
56-65	61	11%	Sender higher	143	27%			
66-75	15	3%	Sender lower	20	4%			
76+	0	0%						
Personal status								
Destination			Close friend	22	4%			
One person	210	39%	Friend	82	15%			
Several people	84	16%	Acquaintance	187	35%			
List or alias	238	45%	Stranger	241	45%			

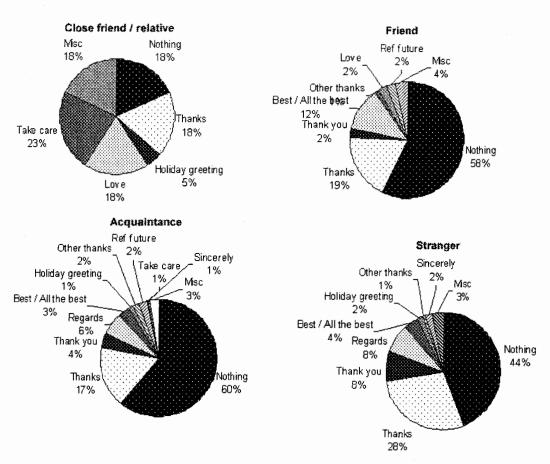
We also see from the data that there were only minor differences in the closings used by men and women. While the overall distribution of closings was very similar, women used "Thanks" slightly more and "no closing" slightly less than men did, but despite this difference, both used "no closing" more than any other closing. Further, "no closing" was used more than any other closing by all age groups except for the 18-to-25 year olds. We must be judicious in drawing any conclusions from this data because of the relatively small numbers of e-mails from this youngest group, representing only 4% of the data, but we can observe, for the examples in this data set, that the 18-to-25 year old senders used "Thanks" just as often as they used no closing.

Moving on to the relationships between senders and primary recipients, we see that personal distance also influences the choice of a closing. Again, we have a relatively small sample size in one category, in this case



"close friend or relative," but we can see in Figure 2 that the variety of closings is more evenly distributed in this group than it is in the other groups.

Figure 2
Closing Used vs. Personal Distance to Recipient



Another noticeable contrast in this grouping is the comparatively lower frequency of no response and higher frequency of "Thanks" when sending e-mail to a stranger compared to a friend or an acquaintance. If the inclusion of a closing is interpreted as being more polite than the lack of one, then the senders in this group were polite to strangers more often than they were to people they knew. This pattern seems to match Wolfson's (1986) Bulge Theory, which says that middle-class Americans' speech behavior toward people they know somewhat is different than their behavior toward people they don't know at all. The Bulge Theory gets its name from the observation that the opposite extremes of friendship, not knowing someone at all and being very close to someone, show similar patterns of speech behavior, while the middle is different. Unfortunately, our sample does not have many examples of very close relationships, so we are only able to show one 'end' of the bulge, but it does seem to be consistent with Wolfson's findings.

Finally, we will note one pattern that is striking for its lack of contrast: that of closing used when sending e-mail to a peer compared to a person of higher status. In the university environment where this data was collected, someone of higher status may be a professor compared to a student or staff member, or a dean or other university official compared to a professor, student, or staff member. One might expect that greater politeness would be used when sending e-mail to someone of higher status than when sending to a peer. Indeed, social distance was another factor where Wolfson (1986) observed a "bulge" of difference in speech behavior when addressing the two extremes versus the middle ground. But, again, if politeness is the use of a closing as opposed to absence of one, then the data does not support this intuition, as Figure 3 shows.

Again one category does not have enough data points to be able to draw conclusions, in this case the "sent to lower" category. But the parallel uses of no closing and "Thanks" between peers and when sending to a person of higher status is clear in this data set. Indeed, the most noticeable difference between these two types of e-mails is that, when sending to someone higher, "Best" or "All the best" was used more and "Regards" was used less than when sending to a peer.

Although these findings are somewhat comparable to Lan's (2000), they show even more use of no closing than she reported, and considerably more thanking (in the form of "Thanks" as well as "Thank you") than she found. In contrast to Grzega's (1999) findings that the majority of cases studied did not show any clear pattern, the present study has found patterns of closings across a variety of factors. This study also has a much larger e-mail corpus than either Lan or Grzega, so a wider variety of closings were observed and the results may be much richer. Unfortunately, although Crystal (2001) used a quantity of e-mails comparable to this study, he did not qualify the senders as native speakers of English, nor did he quantify the various closings used, so few direct comparisons can be made.

Summary and Conclusions

Although the results of this study must be qualified as an initial foray into something that has not been studied before and one that does not attempt to examine wide cross-sections of society, it has yielded several interesting results, and possibly even information that teachers can share with their ESL students. While we can't view these results as definitive or generalizable, we have seen that "Thanks" was used most often when asking someone for information or an opinion, but in all other cases "no closing" appeared more often than any other closing, with "Thanks" or "Regards" coming in a distant second place. We have also seen that "Thanks" was used when e-mailing a stranger more than it was in other cases, but that it is still used less than no closing at all.

Best / All the best □ Holiday greeting Other thanks BRef future Thank you ■ Take care Sincerely
□ Misc □Regards □ Nothing Thanks □ Love sent to lower sent to higher ШП sent to peer 30% 20% 10% %0 40% 20% %09

Figure 3
Closing Used vs. Social Direction

Some ESL students are very anxious about composing e-mails to supervisors or other people of higher status, but one result of this study that may be of comfort to them is the lack of any sharp contrasts in closings compared to those used when sending an e-mail to a peer. Of course, this is not to say that the student can simply use whatever was most frequent in this study, no matter what the circumstances of the e-mail are. But these findings might provide a basis for classroom discussion of e-mail closings, or possibly a guide to what is acceptable (or at least what was used) in one setting.

One particular limitation of this study that must be borne in mind is that it represents only e-mail sent to one person. It does include all e-mails received during a 3- month time period, subject to obtaining permission as described above, so it is not biased in favor of e-mails that were somehow deemed worthy of being saved. The author works in a university environment and lives in an urban area on the east coast of the U.S., which may not be typical of all workplaces and regions, even within the U.S., let alone the entire English-speaking world. This is, however, an example of an environment where there are many ESL students, so it is one important setting in which they are likely to encounter a need to write e-mails.

Although this data may not include the full range of correspondents that someone working in a different setting or living in different social circumstances would encounter, a corpus of data compiled from a wide variety of environments would be a good basis for further research in this area. This study is a first attempt to build up such a corpus of complimentary closings used in e-mail, against which future studies can be compared.

This data provides an interesting point of departure for further research encompassing some of the wider circumstances mentioned above. It does suggest that the area may be worthy of further exploration – it would be interesting to study differences in e-mail closings based on the sender's regional background, job function, or socio-economic status. There are also many other pragmatic features of e-mail that have not been explored. This study has been limited to complimentary closings, but the next line of an e-mail provides a similar quandary: how to sign one's name. Do people use their first name and last name, just their first name, a nickname, a title, or some other form of identification? The appropriate salutation to use at the beginning of an e-mail would also be interesting to study. In this case, although intuition may say that "Dear So-and-so" is a typical salutation for an e-mail just as it is for a letter, the present study has shown that intuition is often an unreliable guide in determining e-mail pragmatics.

E-mail may allow quick and inexpensive communication with a vast community of users, but by using it we interact with a wider variety of cultural backgrounds than we might meet regularly face-to-face, and thus

we increase the possibility of cross-cultural miscommunication. If we are to guide our students in navigating the world of electronic communication, then much more research is required so that we have more empirical data about current practice in communities of native speakers. Perhaps most importantly, we must recognize that even the most mundane feature of a message, such as the complimentary closing, is a pragmatic feature that may vary in unexpected ways.

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Appendix

Close Cross-Referenced with other Variables												
	No close	Thanks	Thank you	Regards	Best / All the best	Holiday greeting	Other form of thanks	Love	Reference to the future	Take care	Sincerely	All others
Gender												
Male (n=321)	57%	18%	5%	9%	3%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	5%
Female (n=211)	44%	28%	6%	1%	8%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%
Age											•••••••	
18-25 (n=23)	43%	43%	4%	0%	. 0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	4%
26-35 (n=147)	50%	20%	6%	6%	3%	1%	1%	0%	4%	1%	2%	6%
36-45 (n=144)	48%	27%	5%	3%	3%	3%	1%	0%	0%	3%	1%	6%
46-55 (n=142)	52%	22%	4%	9%	10%	0%	1%	2%	0%	0%	0%	1%
56-65 (n=61)	64%	11%	8%	8%	2%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	2%	3%
66-75 (n=15)	60%	0%	0%	0%	7%	7%	0%	20%	7%	0%	0%	0%
Destination												
One person (n=210)	50%	20%	5%	4%	7%	2%	0%	3%	2%	2%	0%	5%
Several people (n=84)	48%	14%	2%	20%	5%	0%	2%	0%	0%	2%	4%	2%
List or alias (n=238)	53%	27%	8%	2%	3%	1%	2%	0%	0%	0%	1%	3%
Purpose												
Request help or information (n=152)	28%	46%	12%	5%	4%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	1%	2%
Answer request for help or info (n=133)	68%	5%	4%	11%	5%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%	1%	5%
Information or opinion (n=169)	57%	18%	4%	3%	5%	2%	2%	1%	2%	2%	1%	4%
Appreciation (n=51)	49%	22%	2%	6%	6%	4%	0%	4%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Personal casual topic (n=27)	59%	4%	0%	0%	7%	4%	0%	7%	4%	4%	0%	11%
Social states												
Social status	500/	220/			20/	20/				20/	10/	
Peers (n=369)	50%	23%	6%	6%	3%	2%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1% 0%	5%
Sender higher (n=143) Sender lower (n=20)	55% 40%	23%	6% 0%	0% 45%	10%	0% 0%	3% 0%	1% 0%	1%	0% 0%	5%	1% 0%
Derider 10WET (R=20)	40%	U76	U76	4370	U70	070	0%	076	10%	070	370	076
Personal status							***************************************	***********				eros o nocero
Close friend (n=22)	18%	18%	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	18%	0%	23%	0%	18%
Friend (n=82)	57%	18%	2%	0%	12%	0%	1%	2%	2%	0%	0%	4%
Acquaintance (n=187)	61%	17%	4%	6%	3%	1%	2%	0%	2%	1%	1%	3%
Stranger (n=241)	44%	28%	8%	8%	4%	2%	1%	0%	0%	0%	2%	3%