

**FORMS OF ADDRESS IN EMAILS USED  
BY HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

**MAGYAR EGYETEMISTÁK ÁLTAL HASZNÁLT  
E-MAIL-MEGSZÓLÍTÁSOK**

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**Abstract:** The paper investigates what forms of address Hungarian university students use in emails written to one of their instructors (n = 200) and what forms of address they (n = 44) choose when they are assigned a task to contact an instructor they are not familiar with in email for the first time. The results show that in most cases, students choose formal address terms that are appropriate to the academic context. When asked for the reasons behind their choices, students express the need to be seen respectful towards their instructors, an aspect of which is honouring them by using their academic titles when addressing them.

**Keywords:** *forms of address, Hungarian university students, emails*

**Absztrakt:** Jelen tanulmány magyar egyetemisták megszólítási szokásainak vizsgálatát tűzte ki célul. A vizsgálat tárgyát képezi 200 e-mail, amelyeket az egyetemi hallgatók az egyik oktatójuknak írtak, illetve egy 44 hallgató részvételével lebonyolított kutatás, amely során a hallgatóknak ki kellett választaniuk azokat a formákat, amelyekkel egy számukra még ismeretlen oktatót szólítanának meg az első e-mailjükben. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy az esetek döntő többségében a hallgatók hivatalos megszólításokat választanak, amelyek megfelelnek az egyetemi közegben elvárt normáknak. A megszólítások kiválasztásának hátterében az áll, hogy a hallgatók tiszteletüket szeretnék kifejezni az oktató(k) iránt, amelynek fontos része az, hogy amennyiben az oktató rendelkezik doktori címmel és fokozattal, akkor a megszólításban ez is helyet kapjon.

**Kulcsszavak:** *megszólítások, magyar egyetemisták, e-mail*

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## **1. Introduction**

In general, the linguistic forms interlocutors use to address each other are determined by a rather complex intertwinement of contextual, social, and cultural variables (Wardhaugh–Fuller 2015; Wright 2009). First and foremost, the chosen form of address depends considerably on the language users' cultural background (Wardhaugh–Fuller 2015), as lower power distance cultures tend to favour more egalitarian, thus more informal address forms than higher power distance cultures (Bjørge 2007). In addition, social variables, for example, the interlocutors' gender (Wright 2009) or the degree of intimacy between them, that is, being strangers or close friends can have an effect on what address terms the conversation partners choose (Qin 2008; Salazar-Campillo 2022). Furthermore, the choice of an address form is highly context-dependent (Wardhaugh–Fuller 2015) as the context of work or education constructs different relationships between speakers requiring the use of distinctive address terms (Codina-Espurz–Salazar-Campillo 2019; Scott 1998).

Indeed, even when interlocutors are aware of and consider all the above-mentioned factors, selecting the acceptable linguistic form of address might still be challenging for them or they might even decide to completely avoid using them (Little–Gelles 1975). Nevertheless, when they want to address one another, they have to face the fact that the available grammatical or lexical forms of address vary to a considerable extent within individual languages, ranging from formal or informal pronouns, through specific lexis, to distinctive verb forms (Brown–Ford 1961; Wright 2009; Wright 2013). Also, in multilingual situations, speakers need to consider the cross-linguistic differences that exist with reference to the system and usage of address terms (Hwang 1991; Lorenzo-Dus–Bou-Franch 2013). Finally, speakers have to take into consideration the dynamic nature of address forms as they can transform due to the potential changes in the relationship between the interlocutors (Qin 2008; Wardhaugh–Fuller 2015). Thus, addressing the interlocutor in a conversation in an appropriate manner requires a high level of sociolinguistic competence from the speaker (Formentelli 2009).

The present paper attempts to examine what address forms Hungarian university students of English prefer to use when they write emails to their instructors. The study aims to reflect on the Hungarian cultural norms of address in a potentially bilingual academic setting, with possible cross-cultural and cross-linguistic implications. The research investigates the address terms used in student emails ( $n = 200$ ) as well as the forms students ( $n = 44$ ) would choose in a hypothetical situation when they are required to contact an unknown university instructor for the first time. Besides, the investigation intends to shed light on the reasons behind students' particular choices.

## **2. Literature review**

As far as addressing practices in academic settings are concerned, the use of more egalitarian or more formal address terms in student-instructor communication at

universities seems to depend on the cultural background of the academic setting to a great extent. As the social status and power that govern relationships between students and their instructors vary considerably in different countries, the need to differentiate between lower and higher power distance cultures arises (Hofstede 2001). Such differentiation implies that while the use of more equal address terms is encouraged in the academic settings of low-distance cultures, for example, Norway (Rygg 2021), student-instructor communication in high(er)-distance, such as Korean (Hwang 1991), Greek (Bella–Sifianou 2012), Spanish (Codina-Espurz 2021), or Vietnamese (Pham–Yeh 2020) cultures will require the use of more hierarchical forms of address.

As Hungarian culture is estimated to represent high power distance (Hofstede 2001; Kolman et al. 2003), formal address terms in student-instructor interactions can be expected (Bencze 2005; Dombi 2020; Reményi 1994). Formal address terms in Hungarian can be expressed with a wide variety of grammatical and lexical means, including verbal, pronominal, and nominal forms (Bencze 2005; Domonkosi 2010; Reményi 1994). Apart from inflected verbs that can be used individually when addressing the interlocutors, various singular and plural pronouns can indicate the formality of addresses (Domonkosi 2010; Reményi 1994). As for nominal forms, names, titles, honorifics, and their combinations can serve as address terms. Although first names without other grammatical forms do not necessarily imply informality, the usage of first names in a formal context without a prior and mutual agreement is rather unusual (Domonkosi–Ludányi 2019, 2021). Full and last names are more likely to be used with different titles as forms of address. In Hungarian, both generic and professional titles are available and they can be used individually (e. g. *tanárnő*), they can be attached to last or full names or to other titles as, for example, *Dr. Kovács Ildikó tanárnő* (Bencze 2005; Domonkosi 2010; Domonkosi–Ludányi 2019, 2021; Reder 2007; Reményi 1994).

Generally, Hungarian university students are expected to use formal language when communicating with their instructors; however, the use of address terms in academic settings might still be challenging for several reasons. First, instructors are often not unanimous about how they expect students to address them, and they might ask students to use first names when addressing them despite the formality of the context (Domonkosi–Ludányi 2019; Reményi 1994). In a similar way, unless instructors provide students with clear guidelines of their preferences, the situation might become confusing and problematic for the students (Hildenbrand et al. 2020; Poproski et al. 2021). Secondly, the age (Domonkosi–Ludányi 2021) and gender (O’Neill–Colley 2006) of both students and instructors as well as the mode of communication (Domonkosi–Ludányi 2019; Reder 2007; Wright 2013) might influence the use of address terms to such an extent that it can cause tension between the interlocutors. For instance, when female instructors are addressed in emails, the variability of the forms is higher than in the case of male instructors, as students tend to use more informal terms with their female instructors in more unprecedented ways

(Domonkosi–Ludányi 2019). Also, students are more likely to use formal address terms, i.e., academic titles, in emails than in face-to-face communication (Wright 2009). At the same time, instructors can notice discrepancies between the address terms used in spoken and email communication, for example, while an instructor is usually addressed with a Hungarian professional title in speech (e. g. *tanár úr*), the same instructor can be surprised to receive an email where the student addresses them by their first name (Domonkosi–Ludányi 2019). Finally, when a second or foreign language becomes prevalent in student-instructor communication, cross-linguistic influences start to play a role in the addressing practices of the particular academic setting (Bjørge 2007; Dombi 2020; Reder 2007; Savić 2018). First of all, students might not have enough experience in and exposure to the addressing practices of the target language culture (Dombi 2020; Reder 2007); therefore, they follow the rules of their native languages. Consequently, the (higher/lower) power distance nature of students' native language culture will influence their address choices when they communicate with their instructors in the second or foreign language (Bjørge 2007; Salazar-Campillo 2018). When this second or foreign language is English, addressing practices become more complex due to several different variables.

In English, address terms include the use of first, last, or full names, with or without generic (e. g. *Mr.*, *Ms.*) or professional (e. g. *Dr.*, *Professor*) titles but titles can also be used without names (e.g. *sir*, *madam*) or in certain combinations with each other, for example, as *Madam President* (Brown–Ford 1961; Dickey 1997; Scott 1998; Wardhaugh–Fuller 2015; Wright 2013). Nevertheless, as address forms in English are expressed with lexical rather than grammatical forms, they are subject to change and variation (Formentelli 2009; Wright 2009). Changes, for example, can be observed in the shift from the generic titles of *Mrs.* and *Miss*, which were used to address married and unmarried female interlocutors, respectively, to the more neutral form of *Ms.*, which does not indicate the female addressee's marital status (Fuller 2005). What is more, following a recent gender-neutralisation movement in English, the generic title of *Mx.* was introduced to be used to address both female and male interlocutors without revealing or referring to their gender (Grigoryeva–Nazmieva 2023). As far as variations are concerned, research shows that even though American (Wright 2009) and British (Scott 1998) addressing practices are becoming increasingly informal, they both maintain the hierarchical way of addresses in academic settings, whereby students still address their instructors with formal (academic) titles (Formentelli 2009; Formentelli–Hajek 2016). In contrast, studies conducted at Australian universities show that Australian students do not use (academic) titles to address their instructors (Formentelli–Hajek 2016; Merrison et al. 2012).

Besides research on native varieties, investigations on the address practices of English as a second or foreign language learners abound including students with first languages of Arabic (Almoaily 2018), Greek (Economidou–Kogetsidis 2018), Italian (Formentelli 2018), Spanish (Codina-Espurz 2021; Salazar-Campillo 2022; Velasco

2023), or Vietnamese (Nguyen 2018; Pham–Yeh 2020). Further studies aim to compare the English addressing practices of speakers coming from various countries and whose native languages are different from English (Bjørge 2007; Dombi 2020; Savić 2018). Apart from examining the degree of politeness in student emails, another general aim of these papers is to compare first and second/foreign language addressing practices as well as to see how students' native languages and cultures influence what forms of address they use when they interact with their instructor(s) in English.

### **3. The study**

#### **3.1. Research questions**

The current study aims to investigate the address terms Hungarian students of English choose to use when they send emails to their university instructors in an academic setting that does not offer specific guidelines regarding addressing practices but expects a mutually formal way of communication, unless both parties agree to being mutually informal. In particular, the paper attempts to find the answer to the following research questions:

- 1) What are the forms of address in Hungarian university students' emails that they sent to one of their instructors?
- 2) What forms of address do Hungarian university students choose in a hypothetical situation when they are asked to contact their Hungarian and English-speaking female and male instructors for the first time?
- 3) How do students account for the reasons behind their choices of address forms?

#### **3.2. Data collection and analysis**

In order to be able to answer the research questions, data were collected and analysed in two different ways. First, an email corpus was compiled of 200 emails that were sent to a university instructor, the author of the present paper, by 91 Hungarian students of English during the academic years of 2021 and 2022. All emails were student-initiated, thus, replies to previous messages were excluded. 73 students wrote their emails only in Hungarian ( $n = 164$ ), while 11 students corresponded in English resulting in 12 English language messages. Eight out of the 91 Hungarian students sent both Hungarian ( $n = 13$ ) and English ( $n = 11$ ) emails switching between the languages from one message to another. Thus, the overall corpus for analysis consists of 177 Hungarian and 23 English emails. The address forms used in the openings of the emails were coded according to the following four categories: no address (NA), name only (N), title only (T), and titles with names (TN). Subsequently, the frequency of occurrence of each address category was calculated.

As the naturally occurring data consisted of emails written to one single female instructor, a task was designed in order to have a further insight into students'

addressing practices in an academic setting. Participants were given a list of combinations of four fictitious names with a variation of address terms and were instructed to choose the one that they would use when they first wanted to contact the person in question in an email. The four names referred to a Hungarian and an English-speaking female instructor (*Kovács Ildikó* and *Cathy Smith*, respectively), and a Hungarian and an English-speaking male instructor (*Kovács Imre* and *Carl Smith*, respectively). The forms of address were selected from the previous categorization found in the student emails, that is, names only (N), titles only (T), and titles with names (TN). Altogether 44 Hungarian university students of English participated in this part of the study voluntarily. Each of the 44 participants was given either the two female or the two male names with the different varieties of address terms in order to see the differences between their choices across the two languages. Thus, 22 different choices were made in the case of each of the four instructors, and the frequency of the choices for each instructor was calculated. Participants were also asked to comment on and explain their choices in Hungarian during the completion of the task. This part of the study was recorded with the written consent of the participants, and the provided data were analysed for content in order to see the reasons behind the participants' choices of address forms in more detail. The translations of the Hungarian examples into English are my own.

#### 4. Results and discussion

##### 4.1. Address forms in the emails written to the instructor

The analysis of the address forms in the 200 emails written to the instructor shows that Hungarian university students choose a professional title most frequently when addressing the instructor (see *Table 1*). In the Hungarian emails, the term *tanárnő* (*female teacher*) is used in 82% of the cases. This outcome is in line with the findings of a study by Domonkosi and Ludányi (2019), according to which the most commonly used forms of address in Hungarian university students' emails are *tanárnő* and *tanár úr* (*male teacher*).

**Table 1**  
*The frequency of address forms used in Hungarian and English emails*

	No address (NA)	Name only (N)	Title only (T)	Title and name (TN)
Hungarian emails (n = 177)	8	15	146	8
English emails (n = 23)	3	4	8	8
Total (n = 200)	11	19	154	16

In the English emails, the quasi-equivalents of the same term, i.e., *teacher* or *professor* are used in five and three emails, respectively. A slight modification of the term appeared in one Hungarian and in one English email as well, namely, when the students addressed more than one instructor in Hungarian, they used the term *tanárnő/úr* (*female/male teacher*), whereas in the English email they used the address term *teachers* in plural.

As for the other address terms, they were used infrequently. No address terms appeared in 11 emails, which usually started with a general greeting, for example, *Jó napot kívánok!* or *Good afternoon!* without indicating the addressee. In 19 cases students used names as address forms without any titles, most often the full name (in one English and 12 Hungarian emails), while in the remaining messages they used only the first name (in three Hungarian and in three English messages). According to Domonkosi and Ludányi (2019), the usage of full names (without titles) is becoming more frequent in official Hungarian emails, which could explain why students choose this form of address. The instructor's first name as a form of address also appeared occasionally in the emails despite the lack of prior agreement between the instructor and the students to do so. On the one hand, this might indicate students' lack of awareness of the generally anticipated norms of an academic setting or their disability to distinguish between academic and non-academic official contexts (Formentelli 2018; Salazar-Campillo 2022; Wright 2009). On the other hand, the informal nature of email communication might play a role in students' decisions to address their instructor by their first names (Bella-Sifianou 2012). As first names can be found predominantly in the emails of the students who write to the instructor in both English and Hungarian, cross-cultural influences might have played a role in the students' choices of address forms (Formentelli-Hajek 2016). That is, the more egalitarian English-speaking cultures might affect students' Hungarian addressing practices evoking the use of less formal forms of address. All in all, only a small number of emails contain informal address terms (4%) or no forms at all (5.5%) while in the majority of the cases (90.5%), students use formal address terms, according to and in agreement with the generally expected norms of an academic setting in Hungary.

Lastly, a combination of titles and names was present in 16 emails. Whereas in these Hungarian emails ( $n = 8$ ) the academic title *Dr.* was used with the full name, the English address forms in this category showed considerable variation. Despite their limited number (eight emails), four different types of combinations can be seen. The academic title of *Dr.* with the last name were used once, while the generic title of *Ms.* was used in four emails, twice with the last name only, and twice with the full name. The title *professor* and the last name combination also appeared in three messages. On the one hand, this outcome corroborates the arguments about the variable nature of English address terms (Formentelli 2009; Wright 2009). However, it can also show students' insecurity due to a lack of target language exposure to forms of

address in a foreign language (Poproski et al. 2021; Velasco 2023) or the lack of clear guidelines of preferences from the instructor (Hildenbrand et al. 2020).

#### 4.2. Address form choices in a hypothetical situation

In the second part of the study, 44 students were presented with a hypothetical situation, i.e., having to write an email for the first time to an instructor they do not know, and were asked to choose the address form they would be most likely to use. The analysis of the students' choices shows that the most commonly selected form of address is the instructors' name combined with a title (n = 47), in particular, a combination of an academic title (*Dr.*) and the full name of the instructor (see Table 2). In seven of these cases, the instructors are addressed with a generic title (*Ms.*, *Mr.*, or *Mx.*) and last name combination. The second most frequently selected address terms (n = 37) are the following professional titles: *tanárnő* (*female teacher*), *tanár úr* (*male teacher*), and *professzor úr* (*male professor*) in Hungarian (n = 8, n = 7, and n = 5, respectively), and *professor* and *teacher* in English (n = 16, and n = 1, respectively). The usage of names without titles is the least favoured choice as forms of address (n = 4).

**Table 2**  
*Participants' choices of address forms with reference to Hungarian (Hu) and English-speaking (En) female and male instructors*

		Name only (N)	Title only (T)	Title and name (TN)	
				Academic title + full name	Generic title + last name
Female	Hu (n = 22)	1	8	13	0
	En (n = 22)	1	7	13	1
Male	Hu (n = 22)	2	12	8	0
	En (n = 22)	0	10	6	6
Total		4	37	40	7

In fact, participants' choices show no considerable differences between the Hungarian and English address term practices in case of the female instructors; however, the selected address forms are different compared to the male instructors. As for the female instructors, the academic title and name combination, i.e., *Dr. Kovács Ildikó* and *Dr. Cathy Smith*, is the most preferred choice in both Hungarian and English (n = 13). The second most frequently selected address form is the use of a title, i.e., the term *tanárnő* (*female teacher*) in Hungarian (n = 8) and the terms *professor* and *teacher* in English (n = 6 and n = 1, respectively). One participant used the generic title and last name option (*Ms. Smith*) for the English-speaking female instructor. In addition to these choices, one of the participants opted for using the full name as a

form of address when addressing both female instructors. In the case of the male instructors, participants preferred using the title without names the most frequently, i.e., *tanár úr* and *professzor úr* in Hungarian ( $n = 7$ , and  $n = 4$ , respectively) and *professor* ( $n = 10$ ) in English. This was followed by the use of the academic title *Dr.* with the instructors' full name both in Hungarian ( $n = 8$ ) and in English ( $n = 6$ ), that is, *Dr. Kovács Imre* and *Dr. Carl Smith*, respectively. The difference between Hungarian and English can be observed in the remaining two categories, that is, while the Hungarian male instructor was addressed with his full name by two participants (*Kovács Imre*), six students chose to address the instructor with the generic titles *Mr.* ( $n = 5$ ) and *Mx.* ( $n = 1$ ) and the instructor's last name (*Smith*).

Overall, with the exception of the relatively high number of the generic terms and last name address forms in the case of the English-speaking male instructor, the rest of the participants' choices do not show differences in English and Hungarian. This similarity can be attributed to the fact that the students do not have considerable experience in corresponding in English or with non-Hungarian instructors in an academic setting, thus, it is difficult for them to acquire the forms of address used in the target language (Dombi 2020; Reder 2007; Savić 2018). At the same time, the results partly contradict the findings of previous studies regarding the addressing of female and male instructors (Domonkosi–Ludányi 2019). Although the authors claim that address forms vary more both in quantity and in quality when students address a female instructor, the present research cannot reach such a conclusion based on the outcome of this part of the study. Variability is present only in the case of the English-speaking male instructor with reference to the usage of more generic titles, in particular, the one-time usage of the gender-neutral variety of *Mx.*

### 4.3. Students' reasons behind address form choices

Based on the analysis of the Hungarian university students' explanations of their choices of the particular address forms in the second part of the study, two main issues emerge that seem to play a role in their addressing practices in an academic setting: namely, the conveyance of respect and the perceived importance of academic titles. First of all, in academic settings, instructors expect students to be respectful especially when they are contacted in email for the first time (Bella–Sifianou 2012; Pham–Yeh 2020). Previous studies on students' addressing practices show that students are aware of this expectation and are willing to show their respect to the instructors with the help of the appropriate forms of address (Codina-Espurz–Salazar-Campillo 2019; Salazar-Campillo 2018). This can be observed in the present investigation as well since participants expressed their intention to be respectful towards the instructors when they chose the address forms. According to the students, using the instructor's full name and academic titles as well as using the honorific

attribute *tisztelt* (*respected*) instead of *kedves* (*dear*) in the opening of the email enable them to show their respect to their instructors (see Examples 1, 2, 3, and 4).

Example 1: *I could write it [the email] to anybody if there wasn't a name or title in it.*

Example 2: *When I write to somebody, I want to show that it's not copy-paste, I'm addressing them specifically.*

Example 3: *One of my instructors has recently earned their doctoral degree, I specifically added it [the academic title of Dr.] out of respect.*

Example 4: *We respect them by addressing them with *tisztelt* [respected].*

Secondly, in several academic settings, students are required to use the instructors' academic titles when addressing them, otherwise they will generally be considered impolite (Nguyen 2018; Salazar-Campillo 2018; Wright 2009; Wright 2013). The present study shows that students are aware of the importance that instructors attribute to academic titles, they are willing to pay special attention to ascertaining what titles instructors have, and they are prepared to use these titles when addressing them (as it can be seen in Examples 3, 5, 6 and 7).

Example 5: *If they had an academic title [Dr.], I would use it.*

Example 6: *They worked hard for it [academic title of Dr.], so I would use it, as it's better than using their name only.*

Example 7: *... because when we talk about a teacher, a professor, it shows politeness if we mention their title.*

In comparison to students' extensive attention to academic titles in the second part of the present study, the naturally occurring email data show somewhat dissimilar results. Although titles are used in student emails more frequently than names, they do not usually refer to the academic (*Dr.*) titles of the instructor, but rather to the general title associated with the profession itself (*tanárnő/teacher/professor*). The use of professional titles rather than academic titles in student emails might be related to the lack of clear guidelines from the instructor about their preferences as far as forms of address are concerned (Hildenbrand et al. 2020). This claim is also supported by students' self-reports of the various strategies they employ to be able to determine the instructors' academic titles, including, but not limited to, circulating messages from certain instructors who advised them about addressing practices,

asking their peers about individual instructors' preferences, and trying to find references online about how to address instructors in an academic setting in general, or what academic titles the particular instructors they want to contact have. At the same time, students' sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge regarding addressing practices seems to be restricted to the academic setting since while they completed the task and explained their choices in the second part of the study, their general confusion of the meaning and usage of some of the English generic titles (*Ms.* and *Mx.*) was also revealed.

## 5. Conclusion

The study examined Hungarian university students' addressing practices in student-initiated emails sent to one of their instructors and in a hypothetical situation where they were asked to choose the forms of address they would use when first contacting an instructor. Taking the limitations of the investigation into consideration, the study can draw some general conclusions about addressing practices and provide some implications as well as suggestions for future research.

In general, when Hungarian students contact their instructor, they use formal address terms in the majority of the cases. Additionally, when students are asked to choose the forms of address they would use to contact an instructor for the first time, the results show similar tendencies as students want to be respectful and display this by using context-appropriate forms of address. In connection with that, an implication for instructors is to inform students about their expectations and preferences, thus, facilitating communication.

As for the limitations, the low number of English emails does not allow the examination of cross-linguistics and cross-cultural influences in Hungarian students' addressing practices. Some tendencies can be observed as the similarities between participants' chosen forms of address are, in fact, more notable than the differences. Similarly, the study cannot account for gender differences as the emails under investigation were sent to one instructor, and also as the gender of participants were not taken into consideration in the analysis. These variables could and should be examined in future research.

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