

# THE HINDU Business Line

## Watch your e-mail language

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Uncivil correspondence is the norm these days .— Lingaraj Panda

Call me old-fashioned. I abhor the newer usages of the English language that the students and the staff at my college specialise in. I don't think "u" is "you" and "because" is "coz" and "please" is "plez;" and no smiley face or "colon-hyphen-right parenthesis" brings me any cheer or amusement. I prefer "Regards" to "Rgds" and "PFA" for "please find attached" makes me mad. "Thnx?" No, thanks!

I am not against technology, and understand the novel pressures it imposes on the use of language. For twenty years, I was in the telecommunications industry.

Twitter restricts what one may say with the requirement of brevity, and I appreciate the creative skills necessary to use this tool. Yet I don't think SMS shortcuts may be used with e-mail. Email in the workplace is formal. Even during chat, I insist on full words and sentences.

## **IMPERSONAL COMMUNICATION**

In our institution, as I suppose in others across India, positions and departments write.

For example, I get emails from “PGP,” that is the Post Graduate Programme, a department, with no names or identifying information appended to it at the bottom. The “Entrepreneurship Cell,” a student body, sends e-mails without identifying who is a part of that cell and without any phone numbers. Ditto with the “Industry Interaction Cell,” “Placement Committee,” and on and on. Who composes these emails?

Upon “reply,” it may go to one, some, or all of a dozen people in the sending team or department. I am never sure whom it reaches.

I make it a point to know individuals in the departments I interact with in order to eliminate anonymity, and address my emails by name. Yet, my individual e-mails get departmental answers.

Many believe any communications in English in India is an accomplishment — after all, it is no one’s mother tongue. If the message gets across, and gets work done, is that not good enough?

I remember a mother once say of her teenager: She uses the Internet and is on Facebook. This fact was a source of pride, a measure of accomplishment. I could have said: Beware what she posts on her Facebook account. Whatever she posts or uploads, photos or opinions, may someday be used against her during a job search or a marriage proposal, or in a background check, especially if she becomes famous. Privacy was a remote concern for this mother.

People say I insist on niceties that don’t matter in functional communications. I disagree.

In the high-context Indian society, all communications are tiered, subtle messages, usually of give and take, involving a tussle of power and score keeping. Little is at face value. Hardly any transactions are fully transparent.

This is very much the case in e-mail communications, often combined with thoughtlessness.

## **POWER GAME**

I think frustration is also at work. Individuals — oppressed, for real or imaginary reasons — use the department or team identity as a counter-weight to authority.

The facelessness of departmental identity gives a sense of power, “It’s not me, but my function.” The implicit message: Don’t blame me, I’m only doing my job; better yet, you don’t know who I am, and therefore I have a licence for uncivility, for a thumbing of the nose.

Department-speak, being impersonal, can be unmannerly.

What might be the origin of a phrase like, “Please (sometimes “Kindly”) make it convenient to attend the meeting?” On the sender’s side, the imperative: “drop everything and attend this meeting whatever else may be on your calendar.”

Equally, the seeming request in the obligatory "Please." But why use the convoluted passive-aggressive construction and not simply, "Please attend."

When "kindly" is used, little suggests it. I received an invitation to a meeting at the office of a commissioner of a government department who was only identified in the invitation letter by his title. The letter carried neither an email address, url, nor phone number.

As a result, I could not confirm nor deny my availability. Since this was the first meeting, I did not know who my host was. Nevertheless, I was asked in the letter to "Kindly make it ..." Else what? Nothing really; only bureaucratise in use.

Most emails to me are addressed as "Sir," which eliminates the requirement to spell my name correctly — fortunately not difficult — and thereby avoid polite, customised, personal addressing. Every woman is lazily a "Madam." Naturally, not that kind.

How does this accord with marketing, illustrating the segmentation of one, the individual? It does not. "Dear Sir" is all right if preceded by the addressee's full name and title.

The paradox is this: When we join hands to welcome a guest, we pray to the divinity in the person across us in human form. The genuineness of welcome is palpable to guests.

Yet in day-to-day email behaviour, there is rudeness and thoughtlessness; the computer screen shuts out God.

My son, 21 years old, began sending emails with only his first name a few years ago. I threatened to not read them unless each communication gave me his email address, full name, and phone number.

Now he has a professional "signature" as default in his emails. Progress; he did not resist me, saying, "But Daddy (how silly of you), my email address is already there in the header!"

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