

Generic Move Structure Analysis of Bulgarian Business Emails: A Comparative Perspective on BELF and Native-Speaker Norms

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Abstract. This study examines the rhetorical move structure of Bulgarian business emails written in Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF), comparing them across three distinct groups: Bulgarian business professionals (experimental group 1), professionals from other non-native-English nationalities (experimental group 2), and native-English-speaking business professionals (control group). Using Swales’ (1990) genre theory and move structure analysis, the study identifies key structural patterns and their pragmatic implications. Findings reveal that both experimental groups (Bulgarian and other non-native English professionals) display unique genre adaptations influenced by cultural communication styles, particularly in openings, justifications, proposals, requests, and closings. These variations underscore the impact of cultural norms on business email conventions, contributing to a broader understanding of genre evolution in international business communication.

Keywords: Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF), business email communication, genre studies, rhetorical move analysis, intercultural pragmatics

Лица Пицалова. АНАЛИЗ НА РИТОРИЧНИТЕ ХОДОВЕ В БЪЛГАРСКАТА ДЕЛОВА ИМЕЙЛ КОРЕСПОНДЕНЦИЯ НА АНГЛИЙСКИ ЕЗИК: СРАВНИТЕЛЕН ПОДХОД СПРЯМО БИЗНЕС АНГЛИЙСКИЯ КАТО ЛИНГВА ФРАНКА (БАЛФ) И АНГЛОСАКСОНСКИТЕ ЕЗИКОВИ НОРМИ

Резюме. Настоящото изследване анализира риторичната структура на българската делова имейл кореспонденция на английски език като лингва франка (BELF), като разглежда и сравнява събраните автентични имейли в три различни групи: имейли, написани от български бизнес професионалисти (експериментална група 1), имейли, написани от професионалисти от други неанглоезични култури (експериментална група 2) и имейли, написани от бизнес професионалисти, носители на английски език (контролна група). Чрез прилагането на теорията за жанра на Суетс (1990) и анализа на риторичните ходове, изследването идентифицира ключови структурни модели и техните прагматични импликации.

Резултатите показват, че двете експериментални групи (българските и другите неанглоезични професионалисти) демонстрират специфични жанрови адаптации, повлияни от културните комуникационни стилове, особено при началните обръщения, обосновките, предложенията, исканията и завършващите части на имейлите. Тези вариации подчертават влиянието на културните норми върху бизнес имейл комуникацията и допринасят за по-доброто разбиране на еволюцията на жанровете в международния бизнес контекст.

Ключови думи: Бизнес английски като лингва франка (БАЛФ), бизнес имейл комуникация, жанрови изследвания, анализ на риторични ходове, интеркултурна прагматика

Research/ Научно изследване

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized business environment, effective written communication is crucial for maintaining professional relationships and ensuring clarity in workplace interactions. Among the various forms of business communication, email has emerged as the dominant genre for international exchanges, offering a flexible yet structured medium for business correspondence (Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000). However, as professionals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds engage in email communication, the established conventions of business email discourse are adapted and reshaped to accommodate cross-cultural pragmatics. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) contexts, where English is used as a common working language among non-native speakers, and where mutual intelligibility takes precedence over adherence to native English norms (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013).

The role of genre and rhetorical moves, understood as the micro-level realizations that emerge within the broader generic move structure, has gained increasing

attention in recent research on BELF email communication. Scholars recognize the need to understand how business professionals construct emails in intercultural settings. Swales' (1990) genre theory and move structure analysis provide a valuable framework for examining how emails are structured to achieve communicative goals. Bhatia's (1993) discourse approach to genre studies further emphasizes how professional discourse is shaped by contextual and cultural factors. Within this perspective, business emails represent a hybrid genre that balances clarity, efficiency, and politeness while managing the linguistic and cultural diversity of workplace interactions (Evans, 2012; Gimenez, 2006).

Understanding the generic move structure, operationalized through rhetorical moves, is crucial in BELF email communication for multiple reasons. First, it provides insights into how non-native speakers of English adapt conventional business email structures to align with their linguistic and cultural preferences (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). Second, it highlights potential divergences between BELF and native-speaker email norms, which can lead to communicative misunderstandings or misinterpretations in professional settings (Nickerson, 2005). Finally, move analysis in BELF contexts contributes to broader discussions on intercultural business communication, linguistic pragmatics, and workplace discourse, offering practical implications for professionals engaged in international business.

In the Bulgarian business context, English has increasingly become a primary language for professional communication, particularly in multinational corporations and organizations engaged in international trade. As previous research suggests, the cultural traits of a given professional community significantly influence the structure and tone of business emails, shaping how rhetorical moves such as openings, requests, justifications, and closings are realized in BELF interactions (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2003; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). Thus, Bulgarian business professionals must find the balance between adhering to global business communication norms – often shaped by Anglo-Saxon conventions – and maintaining culturally ingrained communication strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Bulgarian business email communication in BELF settings requires a multifaceted theoretical approach that integrates genre analysis, rhetorical move structures, and intercultural business communication. The foundational theories in this study include Swales' (1990) genre analysis model, Bhatia's (1993) genre-based discourse approach, and broader perspectives on business email conventions within international professional communication. These frameworks provide an essential perspective through which the structural patterns, rhetorical moves, and pragmatic adaptations of Bulgarian business emails can be examined in comparison with both other BELF users and native English business email norms.

The study of business email communication as a genre is rooted in Swales' (1990) theory of genre analysis, which defines genres as communicative events that serve specific social purposes within discourse communities. According to Swales (1990), genres are structured through rhetorical moves, which function as units that contribute to achieving the communicative goal of a text. Each move consists of smaller steps that provide additional structuring to the discourse. In professional email communication, move structure plays a crucial role in ensuring coherence, efficiency, and pragmatic appropriateness. Bhatia's (1993) genre-based discourse approach further refines Swales' (1990) framework by emphasizing how genres are shaped by institutional and professional constraints. Professional genres, such as business emails, follow predictable rhetorical structures that reflect the communicative needs of the professional community.

Previous research on business email communication (e.g., Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000) has identified common rhetorical moves that structure email discourse. While these moves provide a general framework for organizing business emails and are influenced by professional norms, their realization varies across cultures and linguistic settings. BELF users often modify move sequences, adjust levels of directness, and introduce culturally influenced rhetorical strategies to align with their communicative norms.

Several key deviations from native English business email norms in BELF communication have been reported. Charles (2007) found that non-native English business emails often include additional contextualization and relational discourse markers, while Evans (2012) highlighted how cultural preferences shape the framing of requests and negotiations. These findings suggest that BELF communicators strategically adjust their email discourse to align with cultural expectations and linguistic resources. Further empirical studies on BELF business communication, such as those by Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) and Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012), revealed consistent patterns in rhetorical adaptation. Non-native English speakers modify move sequencing to reflect their cultural and professional priorities, often reordering rhetorical moves to better suit their communicative norms. Differences in directness are also evident, as BELF emails tend to balance explicitness with politeness, adjusting their level of directness based on the recipient's cultural background. Additionally, BELF email writers frequently rely on politeness strategies, such as indirect phrasing, honorifics, and hedging, to mitigate face-threatening acts and maintain professional rapport in multilingual business interactions.

The realization of genre conventions in Bulgarian BELF business emails is further influenced by specific cultural communication patterns. Drawing from Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions and Hall's (1976) high-context vs. low-context communication framework, several cultural traits are particularly relevant to understanding Bulgarian BELF discourse. Bulgarian business culture is characterized by a high power distance, which influences email openings, address forms, and the use

of honorifics. Compared to the more individualistic Anglo-Saxon business communication style, Bulgarian professionals emphasize collectivism, favoring group cohesion and relationship-building strategies in email correspondence. Additionally, Bulgarian communication falls within the category of high-context communication, meaning that emails may contain more implicit meanings, extensive background information, and indirect formulations than their low-context Anglo-Saxon counterparts. These cultural factors shape both the move structure and pragmatic strategies employed in business email communication.

While previous studies have explored genre conventions in native English business emails and broader BELF practices, there is still limited understanding of how Bulgarian professionals manage business email discourse in relation to both native English norms and other non-native-English BELF users. This study seeks to analyze the structural organization of Bulgarian BELF emails, examining how their generic move structure reflects cultural influences and diverges from Anglo-Saxon norms. To achieve this, Bulgarian emails will be compared not only to those written by native English-speaking professionals but also to emails from other non-native English professionals. This comparative approach will help determine whether the rhetorical patterns observed in Bulgarian BELF emails are uniquely shaped by Bulgarian cultural and professional norms or whether they align with broader trends among non-native-English BELF users. Specifically, the study aims to:

- examine the structural organization of Bulgarian BELF emails, identifying key rhetorical moves such as openings, justifications, and closings;
- analyze how these moves differ from the prototypical Anglo-Saxon BELF email, with a particular focus on the strategic use of rhetorical moves and their discursive realizations;
- explore the cultural underpinnings of these deviations, particularly in relation to Bulgaria's high-context communication style and its emphasis on hierarchy, respect, and group cohesion.

To achieve the research objective, the study addresses several key research questions that guide the analysis of Bulgarian BELF emails.

- What are the key rhetorical moves of BELF emails written by Bulgarian business professionals, including opening moves, justification moves, and closings?
- How do these emails deviate from the prototypical organization of Anglo-Saxon BELF business emails in terms of rhetorical moves and their discursive realizations?
- To what extent do these structural differences reflect Bulgaria's socio-cultural norms, such as a preference for hierarchy, respect, group cohesion, and high-context communication styles?

By addressing these questions, this study provides a comparative perspective on culturally influenced variations in business email communication and offers practical recommendations for enhancing intercultural competence in global business environments and developing training strategies for BELF practitioners.

Methodology

To align with the study's objective and address the research questions, a structured research design was adopted. The methodology was implemented in three distinct phases: data collection, move structure identification, and a comparative analysis of Bulgarian BELF emails against established native-speaker business email norms. Each phase built on the previous one to ensure robust data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

The **first phase** focused on compiling and organizing authentic BELF emails from **three Bulgarian entities** that represented different sectors within the Bulgarian professional landscape (a non-governmental organization, a state agency, and a consultancy company). These entities were selected for their strong reliance on BELF in international communication. To ensure balanced representation, an equal number of emails were sampled from each entity. Instead of analyzing isolated BELF emails written by Bulgarian business professionals, the study examined entire email threads, naturally incorporating responses from both native English-speaking professionals and professionals from other non-native-English backgrounds. This approach allowed for a dynamic and interaction-based analysis, capturing how business communication strategies evolved within authentic BELF exchanges. The collected data included emails exchanged in various business contexts, such as formal requests, negotiations, and responses to inquiries, and featured both intra- and inter-organizational emails. The dataset encompassed a range of email types, from brief transactional messages to more detailed correspondences, ensuring a comprehensive representation of real-world professional communication. Ethical considerations were rigorously applied during data curation. To maintain participant confidentiality, all identifying information, including names, company details, and sensitive business content, was fully anonymized.

To facilitate structured comparison, all email threads were categorized into three distinct datasets: emails written by Bulgarian business professionals (Experimental Group 1), emails written by native English-speaking professionals (Control Group), and emails written by professionals from various other non-native-English cultural backgrounds (Experimental Group 2). The native-English dataset served as a benchmark for analyzing cross-cultural variations in email communication, enabling a direct comparison between Bulgarian and native English business communication styles. Meanwhile, the third dataset, composed of emails from diverse non-native-English backgrounds, provided a broader reference point, allowing for an analysis of BELF communication patterns beyond a simple binary comparison.

The Anglo-Saxon dataset was notably smaller than the other two due to practical data collection constraints and the study's focus on non-native English speakers, particularly Bulgarian professionals, using BELF in workplace communication. As native speakers, Anglo-Saxon professionals are less reliant on BELF conventions, reducing the need for extensive sampling. Nonetheless, this dataset remained es-

sential as a benchmark, offering insights into prototypical email structures and stylistic norms that shape expectations in international business communication.

The **second phase** of the study examined the structural organization of the collected emails, focusing on variations in rhetorical moves and their discursive realizations. The analysis considered the influence of cultural and professional norms on email composition, particularly in how Bulgarian business professionals' emails aligned with or diverged from Anglo-Saxon email structures. While the primary comparison was between the Bulgarian and Anglo-Saxon datasets, the second experimental dataset helped determine whether observed patterns were unique to Bulgarian professionals or indicative of broader trends among non-native-English BELF users.

A key component of this phase was move structure analysis, which involved annotating and categorizing rhetorical moves within emails, identifying recurring patterns, and evaluating their adherence to conventional business email structures. The study employed a move structure taxonomy based on established genre analysis frameworks, categorizing moves into seven primary types: opening moves, acknowledgment moves, information moves, proposal moves, request moves, justification moves, and closing moves. These categories align with standard business English email conventions while allowing for flexibility within BELF interactions. A structural analysis was conducted using frequency, sequence, and position analysis to quantify the occurrence of rhetorical moves, identify typical move patterns, and examine their placement within emails. Salutations and sign-offs, which are key indicators of formality and politeness, were analyzed as subcategories within the opening and closing moves, respectively. This refinement enabled a systematic assessment of formality levels (formal, neutral, informal), honorific usage, and structural variations in greeting conventions, offering deeper insights into how cultural norms and professional hierarchies shape business email communication.

The **third phase** of the study focused on comparing the Bulgarian BELF emails with native-speaker business email norms based on previous literature. The comparative analysis examined four key parameters. The first was directness versus indirectness, which assessed whether Bulgarian BELF emails displayed more indirect communication strategies compared to native English business emails, particularly in requests and proposals. The second parameter, length and elaboration, evaluated the extent to which Bulgarian professionals provided additional background information and justifications before making a request or stating the purpose of the email. The third aspect explored formality and hierarchical language use, analyzing the degree of formality in salutations, address forms, and closing phrases, with a focus on how business hierarchy and power distance influenced linguistic choices. Lastly, politeness and relational strategies were investigated to determine how Bulgarian professionals maintained interpersonal rapport in business communication through politeness markers, hedging, and relational discourse elements. In the context of business communication, *relational strategies* refer to pragmatic and rhetorical techniques

used to establish, maintain, and reinforce interpersonal relationships in professional interactions. These strategies encompass linguistic and discourse elements that signal politeness and inclusivity, ensuring smooth communication and fostering cooperation, particularly in cross-cultural and hierarchical business settings.

The structured methodological approach outlined in the previous section provided a robust foundation for analyzing the rhetorical move structure of Bulgarian BELF business emails in comparison to native-speaker and broader BELF communication norms. Through the systematic collection, categorization, and analysis of email threads, the study was able to identify patterns in rhetorical structuring, linguistic adaptations, and pragmatic strategies across the three datasets. The following section presents the results of this analysis, offering a detailed discussion of the key findings.

Results and Discussion

The study examined a total of **168 authentic emails** across **34 email threads**, with a particular emphasis on analyzing the genre-specific linguistic and rhetorical features of **90 emails authored by Bulgarian professionals**. The Anglo-Saxon dataset functioned as a reference point for assessing the extent to which Bulgarian emails conformed to or diverged from established business email conventions. Meanwhile, the second experimental dataset offered further insight into whether the patterns observed in Bulgarian emails were representative of broader non-native-English BELF communication tendencies or distinctively Bulgarian.

The distribution of emails across the three datasets revealed significant differences in representation, with Bulgarian business professionals constituting the majority of the dataset. As shown in Figure 1, Bulgarian emails accounted for 54% of the total corpus, followed by emails from other non-native-English BELF users at 37%, while native English emails made up only 9%. This distribution reflected the study's focus on analyzing BELF communication practices among non-native English speakers, particularly Bulgarian professionals.

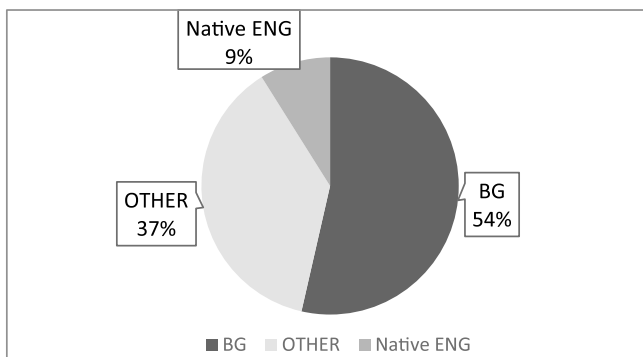


Figure 1: Distribution of Emails Across the Three Datasets

The Anglo-Saxon dataset was notably smaller than the other two due to practical data collection constraints. Additionally, as native speakers, Anglo-Saxon professionals are less reliant on BELF conventions, reducing the need for extensive sampling. Despite the smaller size, the dataset served a crucial role as a benchmark, offering insights into prototypical email structures and stylistic norms that shape expectations in international business communication.

Furthermore, the sender distribution chart (Figure 2) highlighted the diverse cultural backgrounds of non-native-English BELF users, with representatives from multiple European, Middle Eastern, and African countries contributing to the dataset. The presence of such diversity enhanced the comparative aspect of the study, allowing for an examination of whether certain rhetorical strategies were unique to Bulgarian business communication or shared among other non-native English users. The distribution also ensured a balanced analysis of cross-cultural variations in email structuring and pragmatic strategies.

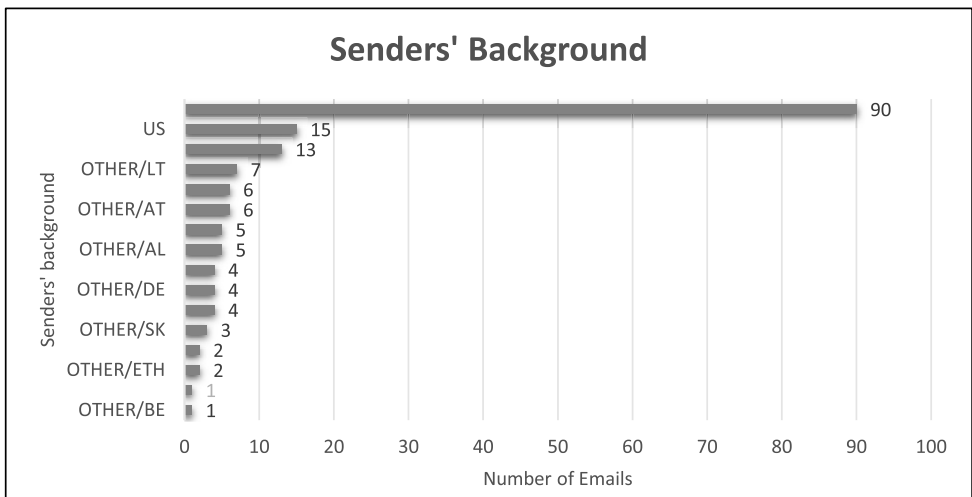


Figure 2: Senders' Background

The findings were analyzed based on the following key aspects: (1) the frequency of rhetorical moves across the three datasets, (2) the sequencing patterns of moves, and (3) the implications of these patterns in terms of directness/indirectness, length and elaboration, formality and hierarchical language use, and politeness and relational strategies. These patterns were further interpreted through the perspective of Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions and Hall's (1976) high-context vs. low-context communication framework, revealing how cultural values shape the rhetorical organization of business emails. By incorporating cultural dimensions into the analysis, the study highlighted the socio-cultural underpinnings of business email communication in BELF settings, demonstrating how Bulgarian profession-

als adapt genre conventions to balance efficiency, politeness, and hierarchy-conscious communication in international business contexts.

The findings regarding **move frequency** and **sequencing patterns** provide a comparative overview of the rhetorical moves identified in the three datasets and offer insights into how Bulgarian BELF emails differ from both native English and other non-native English professional emails. By illustrating the distribution of rhetorical moves and their sequencing, the following charts (Table 1 and Figure 3) highlight key trends in directness, elaboration, formality, and relational strategies across the three groups.

Table 1: Number of Move Occurrences per Dataset

Move Category	BG	Other nationality	Native English
Acknowledgement	39	18	4
Closing	83	58	15
Information	60	29	6
Justification	35	16	1
Opening	51	62	15
Proposal	10	17	7
Request	49	30	4
Grand Total	327	230	52

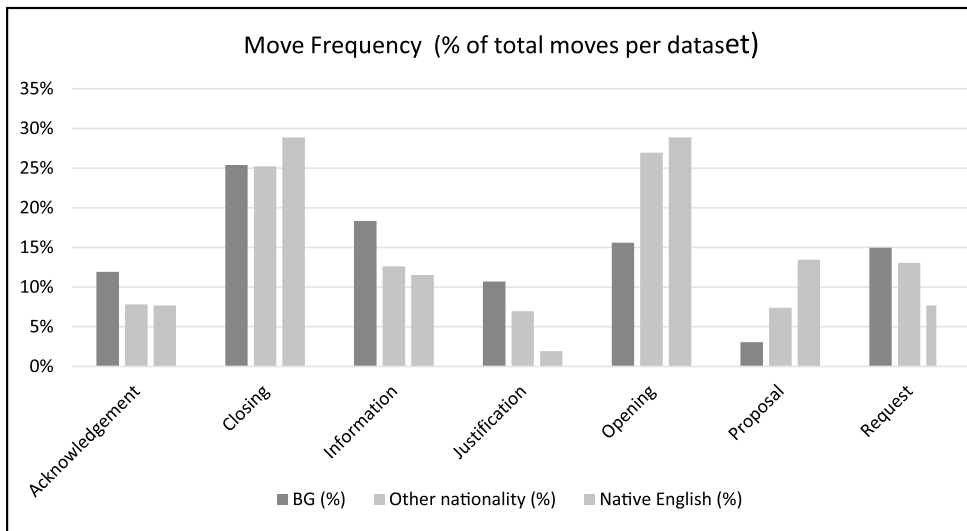


Figure 3: Percentage of Total Moves per Dataset

Move Frequency

The analysis of the three datasets revealed a consistent set of rhetorical moves across all groups, including **opening, acknowledgment, information, justification, proposal, request, and closing moves**. However, notable differences emerged in the frequency and prominence of these moves, suggesting variations in communicative priorities and cultural influences. While all three datasets featured a structured progression of moves, some move types were more dominant in certain groups, while others were underrepresented or absent in specific datasets.

For example, **justification moves** were significantly more prevalent in Bulgarian emails (11%) compared to their minimal presence in native English emails (2%). Similarly, **information moves** appeared more frequently in Bulgarian BELF emails (18%) than in native English correspondence (12%). This indicates that Bulgarian professionals tend to provide additional background information and rationalizations before making requests or proposals, emphasizing the need for context and explanation. Such a pattern aligns with the characteristics of high-context communication cultures, where implicit meanings and extensive background details are used to ensure clarity and mutual understanding. In contrast, native English emails, which adhere to a more direct and low-context communication style, rely less on justification and contextualization, prioritizing efficiency and brevity in business exchanges.

Conversely, **proposal moves** were significantly more frequent in native English emails (13%) compared to Bulgarian emails (3%) and those from other non-native English speakers (7%). This suggests that Anglo-Saxon business communication norms favor direct suggestions and proactive engagement in decision-making. In contrast, Bulgarian professionals appear less inclined to take the lead in negotiations, instead prioritizing relationship-building and consensus-seeking strategies. Their lower use of proposal moves indicates a preference for indirect negotiation tactics that foster relational harmony rather than assertive recommendations. This aligns with the more collectivist and high-context nature of Bulgarian business communication, where maintaining interpersonal rapport takes precedence over direct persuasion.

The dataset revealed that **closing moves** were the most frequently used category across all three groups, with closing statements accounting for 25% of moves in Bulgarian and non-native-English BELF emails, and 29% in native English emails. This consistency suggests that formal conclusions and relationship-building strategies are valued in business communication, regardless of cultural background.

Acknowledgment moves were more frequent in Bulgarian emails (12%) compared to those from other non-native users (8%) and native English speakers (8%), indicating a stronger emphasis on reinforcing interpersonal relationships and demonstrating engagement in Bulgarian business communication.

Furthermore, Bulgarian emails exhibited a higher use of **request moves (15%)** than native English emails (8%), indicating a greater reliance on direct requests for

action, though they were still slightly lower than those from the non-native-English BELF users (13%). This suggests that while Bulgarian professionals use requests frequently, they balance them with **justifications** and **acknowledgment moves**, possibly to mitigate any face-threatening implications.

Move Sequencing Pattern

The comparison of move sequences across the three datasets also highlighted notable differences in the structuring of business emails. However, it is important to note that the move sequences presented in the table below (Table 2) do not exhaust all possible patterns observed in the Bulgarian and other non-native-English datasets; rather, they represent only those sequences identified in the native English dataset. This means that additional move sequences may be present in the Bulgarian and other non-native datasets, reflecting a broader range of rhetorical strategies and cultural influences. The decision to structure the comparison in this way allows for a direct assessment of how the two non-native datasets aligned with or diverged from native English email conventions, while also acknowledging that BELF communication practices are more fluid and adaptable.

Table 2: Comparison of Move Sequences Identified in the Native English Dataset Across All Three Groups

Move Sequence	BG	Other nationality	Native English
OIC	24%	23%	17%
ORC	24%	23%	12%
OARC	42%	10%	2%
OAPC	0%	10%	8%
OPC	0%	11%	6%
OIPC	0%	10%	8%
OC	0%	8%	8%
ORPC	0%	5%	8%
OAJC	11%	0%	8%
OAIPC	0%	0%	10%
OARPC	0%	0%	8%
OPIC	0%	0%	8%

Bulgarian emails exhibited a distinct preference for the OARC (Opening – Acknowledgment – Request – Closing) sequence, which accounted for 42% of the Bulgarian dataset, a significantly higher proportion than in the other groups (10% in other non-native users and only 2% in native English emails). This finding aligns

with the tendency of Bulgarian business professionals to emphasize acknowledgment before making requests, reinforcing politeness and relational strategies.

While OIC (Opening – Information – Closing) and ORC (Opening – Request – Closing) sequences were more prevalent in Bulgarian and other non-native-English BELF emails (24%), native English emails showed a lower frequency (17% and 12%, respectively). This suggests that native English speakers may integrate requests more seamlessly within the discourse rather than relying on explicit ORC structures. Their preference for structures like OPC (Opening – Proposal – Closing) and OIPC (Opening – Information – Proposal – Closing) reflects a more action-oriented approach, where requests are embedded within proposals or solutions, minimizing the need for acknowledgment or justification. This aligns with the goal-oriented and efficiency-driven nature of native English business communication, in contrast to the relational and preparatory discourse seen in high-context cultures.

Additionally, Bulgarian emails completely lacked some sequences present in native English emails, such as OAPC (Opening – Acknowledgment – Proposal – Closing), OPC (Opening – Proposal – Closing), and ORPC (Opening – Request – Proposal – Closing), which are indicative of a preference for making direct proposals and structuring communication around decision-making. The absence of these patterns in the Bulgarian dataset suggests a more indirect negotiation style, where explicit proposals are de-emphasized in favor of preparatory discourse. However, given that the table does not capture all Bulgarian move sequences, it is possible that Bulgarian emails include alternative patterns that integrate proposals in a less direct manner, potentially involving more justification or relational moves before making a suggestion.

Another key difference was observed in relation to the OAJC (Opening – Acknowledgment – Justification – Closing) sequence, which appeared in 11% of Bulgarian emails but was absent from the other non-native dataset and only minimally present in native English emails (8%). This aligns with the observed trend of Bulgarian professionals providing extended justifications before making requests or closing discussions, reinforcing the importance of hierarchical and relational considerations in communication.

Overall, these results indicate that Bulgarian professionals structure their business emails in a more relational and context-dependent manner, often incorporating acknowledgment and justification before progressing to requests. In contrast, native English emails favor a more streamlined, direct, and action-oriented approach, reducing the need for acknowledgment or justification before making proposals and requests. The dataset of other non-native-English BELF users shows an intermediary pattern, reflecting some shared politeness strategies with Bulgarian emails but also a greater tendency toward direct proposals and structured sequencing found in native English emails. However, since additional move sequences were observed in the Bulgarian and other non-native-English datasets that are not included in this

table, further research could provide a more comprehensive analysis of how these alternative structuring strategies reflect cultural and professional norms in BELF communication.

Analysis of Structural Differences

The analysis of move structures in Bulgarian BELF emails, compared to those written by native English speakers and other non-native-English professionals, revealed significant differences in rhetorical organization, particularly in terms of directness, elaboration, formality, and relational strategies.

A key distinction in the data lies in the degree of **directness vs. indirectness**, particularly in the structuring of requests and proposals. Bulgarian business professionals tend to adopt a more indirect approach, often incorporating justification and background information before making explicit requests. While requests constitute a notable portion of Bulgarian emails (15%), their placement within the discourse – preceded by justifications – reflects a cultural inclination toward indirect persuasion rather than direct imperatives. The significantly higher frequency of justification moves in Bulgarian emails (11%) compared to native English emails (2%) suggests a preference for preparatory discourse that mitigates direct impositions. This contrast underscores the differing cultural expectations regarding how directives are framed in professional communication. While native English emails favor concise, action-oriented structures, Bulgarian BELF emails tend to be more relational and indirect, reinforcing interpersonal rapport before making requests or proposals. Moreover, the lower frequency of proposal moves (3%) in Bulgarian emails suggests that they may avoid assertive recommendations, relying instead on collaborative decision-making. In contrast, native English professionals use proposals more frequently (13%), reflecting a greater emphasis on individual initiative.

In terms of **length and elaboration**, Bulgarian professionals display a tendency to include extensive background information within emails, as reflected in the higher frequency of information moves (60 occurrences) compared to their native English counterparts (6 occurrences). This suggests a preference for providing contextual support before proceeding to key points. Similarly, justification moves are more frequent in Bulgarian emails (35 occurrences) than in the native-English dataset (10 occurrence), reinforcing the idea that additional explanation is considered necessary to frame requests and proposals. By contrast, native English business emails appear to prioritize efficiency, often omitting elaborate justifications in favor of directness.

The data further highlight variations in **formality and hierarchical language use**, particularly in openings and closings. Bulgarian emails exhibit a relatively high frequency of opening moves (51 occurrences), which, alongside acknowledgments (39 occurrences), suggests a heightened awareness of business hierarchy and formality and puts an emphasis on maintaining relational aspects in business communication.

Similarly, closing moves were dominant across all groups, but Bulgarians demonstrated a particularly strong preference for them (83 occurrences), reinforcing the role of hierarchical awareness and professional decorum in Bulgarian business culture. While native English emails also contained formal closings (15 occurrences), their lower reliance on acknowledgment moves suggests that business hierarchy plays a less pronounced role in Anglo-Saxon email norms. The native English dataset, with a significantly lower count of openings (15 occurrences) and acknowledgments (4 occurrences), reflects a more transactional and results-oriented approach.

These patterns in formality and hierarchical awareness are further reflected in the use of salutations and sign-offs, as summarized in the table below. The presence, level of formality, and use of honorifics in both salutations and closings provide additional insights into cultural preferences in business communication.

Table 3: Comparison of Salutations and Sign-offs Across the Three Datasets

Feature	Bulgarian Emails	Other Non-native-English Emails	Native-English Emails
Presence of Salutations	Frequently present (3/4 cases)	Regular but slightly less frequent than BG emails	Lowest rate of salutation usage (about half of cases)
Salutation Formality Level	Mostly formal (“Dear [Recipient]”) with some neutral greetings	Balanced mix of formal and neutral salutations	Predominantly neutral (e.g., “Hi”) or omitted
Use of Honorifics	Frequently used (e.g., “Mr./Ms.”)	Less frequent than BG, varies by context	Rarely used, reflecting informality
Presence of Sign-offs	Universally present	Universally present	Universally present
Sign-off Formality Level	Mix of formal (“Best regards,” “Warm regards”) and neutral (“Best”)	Variation between formal (“Kind regards”) and neutral (“Best”)	Mostly neutral (“Thanks,” “Best”)

This comparison underscores the broader cultural distinctions in email etiquette. Bulgarian emails tend to be more formal, incorporating structured greetings and hierarchical honorifics, reflecting a preference for maintaining professional distance and respect. In contrast, other non-native-English emails demonstrate a hybrid approach, blending formal and neutral elements depending on the context and relationship between correspondents. Native-English emails, however, are the most informal, often omitting salutations and favoring brief, neutral closings. These findings highlight cultural differences in professional email etiquette, where Bulgarian emails uphold a hierarchical tone, native-English emails prioritize efficiency and informality, and other non-native-English users adopt a more flexible approach that varies based on situational demands.

Relational strategies also play a crucial role in structuring Bulgarian business emails, reflecting an emphasis on maintaining professional rapport, demonstrating respect, and reinforcing social hierarchies. The frequent use of acknowledgment moves (12%) and justification moves (11%) indicates a preference for building relational coherence before advancing requests or proposals. Bulgarian professionals often position these moves strategically to mitigate face-threatening acts, ensuring that communication remains respectful and considerate of hierarchical expectations. By contrast, Anglo-Saxon emails, which operate within a more individualistic and low-context framework, exhibit fewer acknowledgment moves (8%) and minimal use of justification (2%), underscoring a more transactional approach that prioritizes efficiency over relational maintenance.

Additionally, the preference for structuring emails with an OARC (Opening – Acknowledgment – Request – Closing) sequence in Bulgarian communication (42% of cases) further underscores the relational nature of these emails. This sequencing suggests that before making direct requests, Bulgarian professionals frequently acknowledge previous interactions, express gratitude, or reaffirm the established professional relationship. Such practices contribute to a sense of continuity in communication and reinforce workplace harmony, distinguishing Bulgarian business correspondence from the more direct and action-oriented approach favored in native-English contexts. The prevalence of closing moves (83 occurrences) in Bulgarian emails also reinforces this tendency, indicating a deliberate effort to end interactions on a positive and polite note, often through expressions of appreciation or well-wishing. These patterns highlight the role of relational strategies in shaping Bulgarian BELF communication, positioning it as a negotiation-oriented and rapport-driven practice that values social cohesion alongside business efficiency.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the significant impact of cultural norms on the rhetorical move structure of Bulgarian business emails in BELF contexts. The analysis revealed distinct patterns in Bulgarian email communication, characterized by a strong preference for indirectness, extensive use of justifications, and an emphasis on relational and hierarchical considerations. Compared to native-English business emails, which tend to prioritize efficiency and directness, Bulgarian professionals demonstrate a more context-dependent approach, incorporating acknowledgment and background information before making requests or proposals. The presence of formal salutations and closing moves further reflects the hierarchical and politeness-oriented nature of Bulgarian business communication, reinforcing the importance of maintaining professional decorum in workplace interactions.

All these findings have important implications for intercultural business communication. As global business environments become increasingly reliant on

BELF, understanding cultural variations in email structuring and pragmatic strategies is essential for fostering effective professional exchanges. Business professionals who operate in international settings should be aware of these differences and develop adaptive communication strategies to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps. Additionally, BELF practitioners may benefit from targeted training that enhances their awareness of intercultural rhetorical conventions, helping them navigate diverse communication styles with greater competence and flexibility. Future research could further explore how other cultural factors influence business email practices, providing deeper insights into the evolving nature of professional discourse in multilingual settings.

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