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Article

Standing 'in' and 'out' from the Crowd in a Small Genre: Proximity and Positioning in Applied Linguists' Email Signatures

Erhan Aslan*, and Sylvia Jaworska

Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics, School of Humanities, University of Reading, Reading, Berkshire, RG6 6EL, UK

*E-mail: erhan.aslan@reading.ac.uk

Neoliberal demands in higher education (HE) amplified by the affordances of digitalisation have led to the emergence of various academic branding practices, one of which is the use of email signatures for identity work and self-promotion. Examining a corpus of 200 email signatures created by applied linguists between 2011 and 2020, this study identifies core and optional moves and how the moves orient to proximity (scholarly communities) and positioning (reputational work). The quantitative analysis of the dataset supported by semi-structured interviews with a group of academics shows that while core moves provide basic identity information, optional moves are used strategically for positioning. A comparison by career stage reveals that mid-career academics utilize more positioning than early-career and established academics. The positioning moves in the second half of the decade draw more on academic achievements, multimodality, and digital presence. The study contributes to an enhanced understanding of how a small and originally inconspicuous genre becomes a space for academic branding and evaluates this development against the increasingly competitive and precarious conditions of the neoliberal HE sector.

Introduction

Despite the surge of new forms of digital platforms and genres, email remains a widely used communication tool in professional and academic contexts. While it is hardly remarkable to end an email message with a signature containing information about the identity of the sender (Chen et al. 1999), it is striking that this space is used not just for that purpose. It is the primary aim of this study to investigate systematically what happens in academic email signatures produced by applied linguists and the possible reasons behind some of the observed practices. Combining the concept of genre with the notion of small texts (as shall be described later), we conceptualize email signatures as a small digital genre that is composed of a set of core and optional moves. Since academic email signatures are intrinsically linked to academic identity, we employ Hyland's (2015) constructs of positioning and proximity to explore and understand

how applied linguists engage in identity work in email signatures by signalling their membership in the applied linguistics (AL) community and positioning themselves as individual academics.

In higher education (HE) contexts, most research on emails has focused on the pragmatic aspects of communication, such as politeness (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Aslan 2017; Edstrom and Ewald 2017) and opening and closing moves (Bou-Franch 2011), while there is a limited number of studies looking specifically at email signatures. Some of these studies explore mostly the impact of hierarchy and power differentials on their presence or absence (Sherblom 1988; Panteli 2002; Cho 2010; Bou-Franch 2011). Others focus on the contents and functions of email signatures but mostly only in corporate settings (Chen et al. 1999; Rains and Young 2006) where email signatures have been found to have a basic transactional function including personal name, phone, organizational name, title, and fax and were generally less multimodal. Harmon-Jones et al. (2009) who explored academic emails found that faculty with more publications/citations displayed fewer symbols of attainment in their email signature compared with faculty with fewer publications/citations. Rains et al. (2009) highlighted the interpersonal functions of 'electronic bumper stickers'—that is, sayings of wisdom, humour, advice, or sociopolitical commentary that are included in email signatures. In this body of research, what remains relatively unexplored, particularly in academic contexts, is what academics include in their email signatures to display their academic identities and whether the ways of doing so have changed over time.

This study explores a corpus of academic email signatures used by applied linguists in the US and UK between 2011 and 2020. The purpose of the present study is twofold. First, we explore the ways in which applied linguists utilize this small digital genre to display their professional identities, what kind of semiotic choices they make to do so and what these choices signal. By adopting the term 'small genre', we draw on the conceptualizations of 'small texts' or 'short texts' (Hausendorf 2009; Schmitz 2021) understood as a gamut of text types that are ubiquitous, relatively short, purpose-orientated, often conventionalized and increasingly multimodal. Second, we explore the extent to which the practices identified in email signatures have changed in the AL community over the last decade, which has been marked by two important transformations: a steady development of universities into business-like enterprises and the increased use of digital technologies such as Twitter/X and other social networking sites for academic identity work (Veletsianos 2016; Lupton et al. 2017). By revealing the discursive practices in such a small genre, we aim to understand the broader implications of what it means to be an 'ideal' applied linguist in the age of neoliberal individualism and self-branding (Khamis et al. 2017). We supplement our quantitative analysis of the email corpus with interviews with six applied linguists at different stages of their academic careers.

Literature review

Academic email signatures as a small genre of academic identity work

The present study combines the notion of genre (Swales 1990; Hyland 2015) and small texts ('kleine Texte') (Hausendorf 2009; Schmitz 2021) to conceptualize our discursive object of study, that of academic email signatures, as a small genre. Following Swales (1990), we see academic email signatures as a genre because as any other text type, they are goal-orientated and structured in a particular way. Analogous to other genres, academic email signatures share several characteristics or moves that make them easily recognizable as such. This notion of genre allows us to understand what is typical and what is optional when it comes to the discursive choices that academics make in their signatures thereby revealing the scope of practices that are pertinent to this text type.

At the same time, the genre in question is different from genres usually explored through the lens of genre analysis (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993) in that it does not comprise long and fully fledged texts. Email signatures are not normally composed of well-formed sentences but are short assemblages of different semiotic resources including words, numbers, images, and hyperlinks that together and in a particular order produce this particular text type. In doing so, email

signatures fit well the gamut of 'small texts'—textual entities such as stickers, lists, notices, graffiti, posters, slogans, train timetables and the like, which permeate everyday and public communications, but often remain marginalized in research compared to larger and fully fledged genres such as the academic essay or research article. Small texts tend to be relatively short, goal-orientated, textual, and often multimodal fragments that rarely constitute well-formed sentences (Schmitz 2021). Consequently, when investigating academic email signatures, our focus needs to shift from conventional and structural aspects to delimitating and analyzing fragments of language and other non-language elements that construct this kind of assemblage.

While the notion of small genre helps us delineate academic email signatures from other larger genres and identify their properties, they are not just typical small textual fragments; they are, first and foremost, important resources for people and communities to *get some things done* (Bhatia 1993). The present study explores precisely what *gets done* in academic email signatures and how *this doing* has changed over time. Because academic email signatures are intrinsically linked to academic identity, we find Hyland's (2015) broadened understanding of genre as an interface between the individual and the (academic) community especially useful in conceiving this small genre as a discursive *space* that enables individuals to construct their small texts to position themselves as (competent) members of their respective communities. As will be shown below, academic email signatures afford some 'personal wriggle-room' (Hyland 2015: 33) to make identity claims in idiosyncratic ways, generic or novel, and express a desired persona even when fixed templates are available.

Understanding academic email signatures as discursive spaces in which writers engage in crafting and displaying their personas aligns with the notion of identity as 'a relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse context of interaction' (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 585–586). That is, identities are rather fluid and emerge within and through the discourse practices in which individuals participate (Davies and Harre 1990) in an active process of 'being, doing and construing' (Lillis 2013: 125). From Goffman's (1959/1990) dramaturgical perspective on social interaction, identity performances can be visible (frontstage) or hidden (backstage) depending on audiences and social situations. In this vein, digital communication has afforded individuals with new ways of self-presentation through various semiotic choices (Page 2012; Tagg and Seargeant 2016) and email signatures as a small genre are no exception. They can be seen as examples par excellence of Blommaert's (2018: 52) 'performative genre work' whereby individuals use existing conventions and resources but can employ them in different ways to create their unique displays of identity.

Hyland (2012, 2015) refers to the relationship between generic conventions and the idiosyncratic persona one wishes to project as a distinction between *proximity* and *positioning*. Proximity is a receiver-oriented view of communication; it involves making appropriate choices from a pool of shared discursive resources within a community to construct recognizable texts. Positioning, on the other hand, emphasizes how writers appropriate these discursive resources 'to make a name for themselves and stand out from the crowd' (Hyland 2015: 33). In other words, proximity is the distance between the myriad of disciplinary texts, discourses and rhetorical conventions established within a community of practice shaped by mutually engaged and shared ways to pursue common interests and endeavours (Lave and Wenger 1991) and the persona one feels comfortable expressing or projecting. Conversely, positioning is about how an individual chooses from the available discourses and rhetorical conventions within the same community of practice to highlight different identities. This does not mean that they have to step 'into a pre-packaged self' (ibid.); they can use the generic space and the available resources to position themselves and craft their identities, but at the same time, need to align, at least to some extent, with shared expectations and practices and with what is seen as valued and desirable within the community for which the text is intended. This is known as *audience design* (Coupland 1980; Bell 1984). As Hyland (2015) asserts, identity is not just what makes us different but also what makes us similar. For academics, this means the need to achieve both 'credibility as insiders and reputations as individuals'. (ibid., 2015: 36), or as we conceptualize as standing 'in' and 'out' from the crowd.

Positioning and proximity are pertinent to a range of genres with which academics manage their professional communication and identities. Before the digital age, published work including authors' bios were examples of the main public displays of academic credentials. Digital technologies have offered individuals new opportunities to present their work in unconventional ways, thus, engaging in proximity and positioning in more explicit ways. Hyland (2015) discusses institutional and private homepages as one of those newer genres that offer diverse resources for that kind of academic identity work. Academics use websites to showcase their research, publication, and teaching, but also to display their connections with other relevant communities; they often personalize their identities through photos and images and show accomplishments and interests other than those that are academic.

Similar to institutional academic webpages, academic email signatures are a part of the wider network of institutional communications. Academics draw on a pool of available semiotic resources including words, abbreviations, visual and symbolic means such as images, numbers, or hyperlinks to create their signatures. These choices form coherent units or moves, with each move performing a distinctive function. Moves that are repeated in most or in a substantial proportion of our signatures might therefore point to shared practices that are likely becoming a norm and therefore a resource deemed important for academic identity-making in the discipline of AL. Thus, email signatures present an interesting case to study due not only to *how* applied linguists use this small genre to construct and perform their academic identities but also what kind of practices and norms have emerged or are emerging to show *who we are* and *what we do* in the increasingly competitive and neoliberal HE sector.

The neoliberal university and the 'ideal' academic

Neoliberalism, being the ideological foundation of present-day capitalism, is based on the notion that individuals should be free to make their own choices and to pursue their own self-interests. It postulates that 'human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'. (Harvey 2005: 2). The focus on the individual shifts the responsibility from the state and society to the person who is now the architect of their future and has only to make the *right* choices.

Neoliberalism influences how organizations, including universities, operate these days dictating the conceptualization of what is good or right performance and who counts as a good or right worker, in short, who the i*deal* worker is (Archer 2008). This has set a powerful model based on a particular form of subjectivity—the high performer—able to stretch beyond their limits, compelled never to rest, constantly self-improving and delivering maximal returns for the organization and contributing to its efficient operations (Gill and Scharff 2011; Adamson 2017). Although neoliberalism ideologically insists on individual freedom, self-responsibility, and reduction of restrictions, in practice, mechanisms of regulation and control are introduced to ensure that the individuals are on the *right* path—that is towards becoming the ideal worker, and if not, then nudged in the *right* direction. Performance, promotion, and workload management, and various forms of evaluation, rankings, and metrification that burgeoned with the rise of neoliberalism are some of the widely used auditing and disciplining practices for ensuring productivity, efficiency, and success. But merely monitoring employees is not enough. Everything they do must be meticulously documented, precisely quantified, and compared to the performance of others, fostering an unceasing culture of competitiveness to instigate behaviour in which individuals willingly and obediently engage in self-surveillance and self-optimization to align with the neoliberal ideal.

Although neoliberal practices and policies have been mostly associated with corporate organizations, they had a profound impact on academic institutions, particularly in the UK and the US, changing how HE conceptualizes and evaluates academic work and knowledge (e.g. Morrish and Sauntson 2016; Morrish 2017; Lund 2018; Bartram 2020; Macfarlane 2021). In the UK, for example, the neoliberal efforts to strive for more productivity and efficiency coupled with the reduction in state funding led universities to compete with one another for

sources of funding, and these sources include mostly fee-paying students and external grants. While competition and rivalry are not a new phenomenon in academia, and universities and academics have always competed for status and prestige, the influence of neoliberalism has raised it to new heights. It increased the role of ranking mechanisms such as league tables or national assessments of research and other key performance indicators (KPIs) with which universities proudly plaster their institutional spaces online and offline. Because most performance indicators rely on quantifiable data, any productivity metric that can be translated into a numerical value is considered significant. This significance applies also to individual academics, as their academic activities are closely scrutinized and measured. The number of outputs such as publications that appear in high-impact journals, h-index, and other citation metrics as well as the amount of wealth in the form of external funding that they have secured are now indicators used to assess academics and to reward (promote) or 'punish' them (not to promote, demote or replace) (Morrish and Santon 2016). It is not only the material outputs such as publications or citations that are quantified and considered; boosted by social media platforms such as Twitter/X or Facebook, attention to an output or academic activity is now also captured in terms of likes, shares or mentions, and turned into a metric known as Altmetrics.

The neoliberal insistence on monitoring and measuring has impacted processes of academic progression and the nature of the work that academics perform. As the significance of metrics and quantified data has grown, it has become common for scholars to dedicate a significant amount of time to creating and curating digital presence and showcasing their outputs and other metrics wherever possible. Sharing news of academic successes, no matter how small or large, on social media sites is a ubiquitous practice performed to enhance visibility and attention scores. This kind of information also features prominently in CVs and online profiles because it is increasingly required by institutions when it comes to rewards and promotions. Lund (2018) views this kind of practice as academic boasting, which, as she claims, has become a key part of the dominant neoliberal model of an 'ideal' academic—an entrepreneurial, competitive and self-governing persona (Morrish and Sauntson 2016) who prioritizes work above everything else, churns out one publication after another, brings in large sums of funding from external sources, and engages in constant self-publicity and self-marketing via social media sites and similar platforms. While this kind of self-promotion can indeed be perceived as boasting, it needs to be noted that this is not always freely chosen. It is rather enmeshed in the neoliberal regulatory and monitoring practices such as rankings, performance, promotion, and appraisal systems that are imposed top-down and 'lock the individual into a distinctively neoliberal subject formation'. This aims to produce compliant academics who follow the neoliberal order to achieve more productivity and efficiency, while worryingly, the core academic goals and values such as intellectual curiosity and taking intellectual risks, critical thinking, and critique seem to be deemphasized (Morrish and Saunston 2016: 56). Given the increasingly precarious conditions of academic employment, critique and/or resistance to such practices become increasingly difficult, as they might jeopardize one's academic progression and career.

Considering email signatures as a small digital genre for displaying academic proximity and positioning against the background of the increasing compulsion to self-promote, this study endeavours to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the key discursive moves and resources that applied linguists use to highlight positioning and proximity in their institutional email signatures in the context of UK and US universities?
2. Does an individual's academic career stage affect how they highlight positioning and proximity in email signatures?
3. Have there been any changes in how applied linguists engage in proximity and positioning in email signatures over the last decade (2011-2020)?

In answering these three research questions, we are ultimately interested in identifying the kind of discursive practices, norms, and values that underpin the performance of academic identities in our community of practice and in investigating the extent to which societal and technological transformations have impacted how we construct and display our professional identities. We intend to shed light on whether explicit positioning work is indeed becoming a norm or whether this is a practice that is negotiated or possibly resisted in light of the data from email signatures as well as interviews with some academics.

Methodology

The data for this study consists of a convenience sample of 200 email signatures that were collected from email messages produced by applied linguists in the UK and US and posted on public mailing lists of special interest groups or relevant associations and distributed via, for example, the JISCM@il listserv. Because the messages from which we collected the email signatures were shared on public email archives, we did not seek consent from the individuals, given that individuals subscribing to the listserv agreed for their messages to be included in public email archives. This, of course, does not mean academics have agreed to the use of their signatures in a research study. Because we did not reveal any individual email signature in the paper, there is no risk or harm to any academics as no information as to their identities was revealed. The corpus also included email signatures from messages that we received from colleagues and announcements made on mailing lists. Around 15% of the collected email signatures (32 signatures) are 'donations' from applied linguists who upon hearing about the project were keen to supply their data. Collecting email signatures from different sources contributed to the diversity of our corpus. We received ethical approval from our institution for all study procedures and ensured that individual signatures were all anonymized before the analysis.

The collected signatures were mostly included in the first message posted by the researchers, and only one signature from an individual academic was included in the corpus. Unlike previous research on email signatures, we were neither interested in the presence or absence of signatures in email messages (Sherblom 1988) nor in the directionality between senders and recipients based on power or hierarchical differentials (Panteli 2002). Rather, we aimed to explore what kind of discursive practices the signatures displayed and what changes could be observed. The corpus covers a period of 10 years beginning in 2011 and ending in 2020 to understand the changing discursive practices in academic email signatures in the field of AL given the technological changes and neoliberal reforms that have affected universities over the last decade. A total of 20 email signatures were included per year and they were all written in English.

The analysis proceeded with devising a comprehensive coding manual, which was established iteratively. The set of coding categories was identified following an initial analysis of a smaller sample of 50 signatures from across the last 10 years. The categorization proceeded in a genre-analytical way by identifying first the discursive moves and resources therein. We understand moves as discursive units that perform a particular function, that is, provide particular information or content, while resources are language and other semiotic elements that are used therein. For example, personal digital presence is identified as a move, while links to Google Scholar or ORCID are resources that are used to construct this move (see Table 1). In the next step, informed by the theoretical notions introduced earlier, the discursive moves that emerged from the iterative analysis were categorized into two groups, namely *positioning* and *proximity* (Hyland 2015). All 200 emails were coded according to the manual described in Table 1.

In the positioning category, we coded lexical information that indexes a relationship between an academic and their individual academic accomplishments. The information included in this category pertained to an academic's personal title, current position, and attained academic degree qualifications. Academic achievements such as grants, journal editorship, and publications were also coded under this category as they are closely linked to an academic's standing within their own academic community. Digital and multimodal information relevant to online

Table 1 : The coding manual

	Coding categories
Positioning	Academic title (e.g. Dr, Prof.) Academic position (e.g. lecturer, professor, reader) Academic degree qualification (e.g. BA, MA, PhD) Professional qualification (abbreviations or mentions) Editorship (e.g. editor of journal X) Personal digital presence (e.g. links to Google Scholar, ORCID, Research Gate) Academic achievements (e.g. lists of publications and grants) Multimodal elements (e.g. links to personal blogs, websites; book covers, awards, empowering or other messaging)
Proximity	Contact information (e.g. institution, school, department, postal address, telephone, fax, email) Administrative roles (e.g. programme director, head of department) Professional affiliations (e.g. memberships, fellowships, associations) Institutional digital presence (e.g. links to university social media, webpages) Multimodal elements (e.g. institutional logos, institutional messaging with multimodal elements)

individual academic dispositions such as academic social media handles, book cover and award images, external blogs, and personal websites were also included in this category.

In the proximity category, on the other hand, we coded information signalling how academics establish a relationship between themselves and their respective institutional and disciplinary communities indexing membership and affiliation. In this vein, the proximity category included information about institutional administrative roles within a department or university as a mutual frame of reference within the institution and in the larger academic community, affiliations with scholarly and professional communities and organizations, and signifiers of institutional identity such as contact information, school, department, and university names. The multimodal elements in this category were pertinent to institutional and professional social media accounts or webpages, logos, images, and other relevant content.

In our analysis, we coded the presence or absence of the different types of discursive moves and resources and, where relevant, recorded specific numbers, for example, the number of publications and digital platforms where academics signalled their presence. We coded most of the corpus together (around 150 signatures) and the remaining 50 were coded by one of the researchers independently. Any discrepancies and unclear cases in terms of the coding were discussed and a mutual agreement was reached.

We need to note that at times the difference between positioning and proximity was not clear-cut. For example, the role of a Research Director can index both, institutional high-stake responsibility but also a personal academic accomplishment because it is often awarded to a scholar who has produced a significant body of research and can act as a role model. Yet, we decided to categorize institutional roles under proximity since managerial and administrative roles depend on institutions and institutional structures. For example, in the UK context, the Research Director role is often tied to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and institutional monitoring practices in the run-up to this assessment. As confirmed by our interview participants, in some universities such roles rotate among members of a department or School and often academic staff are simply required to take them up as part of a workload distribution.

To answer research question 1 (RQ1), we calculated the frequencies of the moves to identify the general tendencies in academic identity display in email signatures. For RQ2, we computed two dependent variables on SPSS (Version 28), namely *proximity* and *positioning*, by creating a score for each academic email signature based on the total number of the discursive moves pertinent to each dependent variable, as shown in Table 1. To see the possible effects of career

stage in proximity and positioning scores, we created an independent variable of *academic career stage* by assigning each email signature creator the status of *early career*, *mid-career*, or *established* by looking at their academic rank or position. In most cases, this information was provided in the email signature but in cases where it was not, personal profiles on institutional websites were consulted at the time of corpus creation. The early career group involved teaching fellows, lecturers, and assistant professors; mid-career academics were senior lecturers, associate professors, and readers; and established academics were full professors. Next, because we had more than three independent variables, we chose to run a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to detect group differences on proximity and positioning. For RQ3, we created two independent variables by dividing the last decade into two halves, the first half 2011–2015 and the second half 2016–2020 to identify any changes in email signature practices. We then ran a MANOVA to see the effects of the first and second half of the decade, if any, on proximity and positioning display in email signatures. In addition, to see the possible changes in the discursive moves, we ran a series of independent samples *t*-tests to compare the mean scores for the information types in the first and second half of the decade.

Our quantitative analysis is supported by insights from semi-structured interviews (see Appendix) with a focal group of academics ($n = 6$) whose email signatures were included in the quantitative analysis. The academics were chosen from different academic ranks representing the three career stages and included two full professors, one associate professor, and three lecturers. Participants were initially approached by email, and they were sent an information sheet and consent form before participation. While some interviews were conducted online on the Microsoft Teams platform and lasted around 30 minutes, due to availability constraints, some were given the option to submit responses to the interview questions via email. The anonymity of the participants was protected at every stage of the research, and they reserved the right to withdraw from the study at any time. We also received informed consent forms from the academics who volunteered to participate in the interviews.

Findings

General tendencies of academic identity display in email signatures in AL

In response to the RQ1 aiming to identify the moves in email signatures in the AL community of academics, we present below the frequency statistics (Table 2) with respect to the categories that appeared in the email corpus. Figure 1 displays an example of an anonymized signature, which can be considered a representative signature with its core and optional moves as identified in our sample and discussed in detail below:

Categories such as name/surname, academic position, and contact information appeared in more than 70% of all collected signatures and can be therefore classified as the core moves of this small genre. Academic titles, administrative roles, and digital institutional presence appeared in more than half of the corpus. In what follows, these categories are described in depth.

An overwhelming majority of the signatures included information about academic positions. In our corpus, the rank Professor had the highest percentage followed by Associate Professor, Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, and Assistant Professor, respectively. The job titles that are lower in the academic rank ladder such as sessional lecturer, teaching associate and postdoc had relatively less representation, which might be attributed to the scarcity of these positions in the field in general as well as their precarious status (e.g. temporary contracts) – something that some academics might not foreground. Similarly, job titles such as Reader or Principal Lecturer were less frequently found and this might have to do with the changing conventions in the academic ranking system particularly in the UK where Reader, Associate Professor, and Senior Lecturer may equate to the same rank in some institutions. These findings indicate that the inclusion of academic positions might be related to the relative power and status of the position itself, meaning that the higher the rank, the more likely it will be included in the signature.

Table 2: Frequency of the information categories

	Information category	Frequency	Percentage
Academic identity category	Name/surname	200	100
Positioning	Academic title before the name	99	49.5
	Prof	77	38.5
	Dr	22	11
	Academic position	160	80
	Professor	43	21.5
	Associate Professor	38	19
	Lecturer	31	15.5
	Senior Lecturer	19	9.5
	Assistant Professor	18	9
	Reader	4	2
	Adjunct/sessional lecturer	2	1
	Post-doc	3	1.5
	Principal lecturer	1	0.5
	Teaching associate	1	0.5
	Academic degree qualification	**76**	**38**
	PhD	66	33
	MA	6	3
	BA	4	2
	Professional qualification	26	13
	Editorship	24	12
	Personal digital presence	73	36.5
	Personal social media	27	13.5
	Personal website	15	7.5
	Twitter	15	7.5
	Facebook	1	0.5
	Blog	1	0.5
	ResearchGate	1	0.5
	Academia.edu	5	2.5
	ORCID	7	3.5
	Google Scholar	1	0.5
	Academic achievements	56	28
	Publications	35	17.5
	Number of publications		

Table 2. Continued

	Information category	Frequency	Percentage
	1	16	8
	2	14	7
	3	1	0.5
	4	3	1.5
	6	1	0.5
	7	1	0.5
	Grants/projects	21	10.5
Positioning/proximity[1]	Multimodal elements	102	51
	Messages	32	16
	Images	20	10
	Institutional logo	12	6
	Disclaimer	7	3.5
	Book cover	2	1
	Award	2	1
	Video links	2	1
	Environment	1	0.5
	Quote	1	0.5
	Other	23	11.5
Proximity	Administrative roles	87	43.50
	Program director	35	17.5
	Head of department	18	9
	Director/Head of research centre	12	6
	Coordinator	9	4.5
	Dean	5	2.5
	Teaching-related	4	2
	Admissions tutor	2	1
	Head of school	1	0.5
	Senior tutor	1	0.5
	Professional affiliation	24	12
	Contact information		
	Institution	190	95
	Postal address	158	79
	Telephone	127	63.5

Table 2. Continued

Information category	Frequency	Percentage
Department	121	60.5
School	92	46
Email	85	42.5
Fax	32	16
Digital institutional presence	94	47
Institutional personal webpage	55	27.5
Institutional page	25	12.5
Institutional social media	14	7

[1]While multimodal elements are presented here together, they were later coded either as positioning or proximity depending on the nature of the information shared.

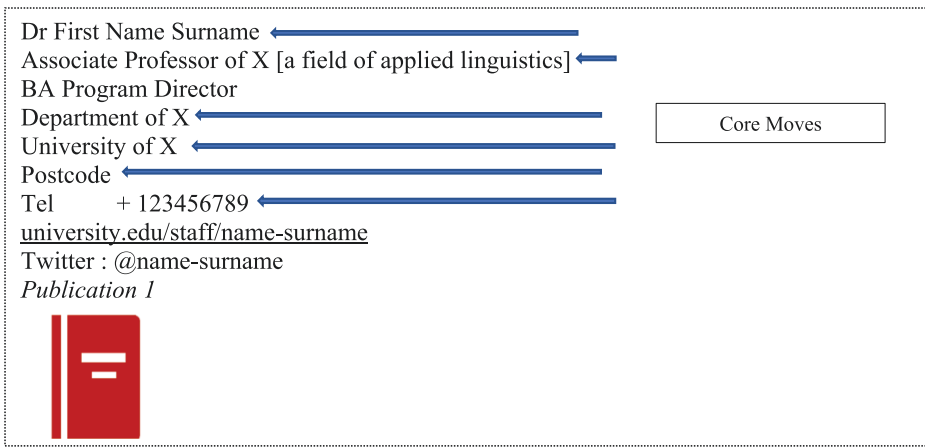

Figure 1: An example of a representative email signature.

With respect to academic titles, the prefixes Prof. or Dr usually preceding personal names were commonly used in nearly half of the corpus (49%). The occurrence of the title Prof. was more common than that of Dr, which aligns with the highest percentage of the rank/position of Professor in our sample. A little more than half of the signatures did not include an academic title. Academic titles Prof. and Dr may reveal an important distinction in one's academic career—whether an academic is promoted or not, particularly in the UK context. The finding that Prof is more common in our sample indicates that academics that have reached this level in their career may prefer to index this ultimate achievement and position themselves as credible and authoritative in their field.

In terms of academic degree qualifications, while 67% of the corpus was lacking this information, of the 33% signatures that did include degrees earned, 43.4% had the PhD degree title, while BA and MA degrees appeared in less than 5% of the corpus. It could be argued that academic degrees may not be as strong an indicator of status and credibility as academic positions and titles, as they may be perceived as past achievements by some academics. In line with the previous findings with respect to top academic positions and titles, the highest academic degree earned also appeared more frequently in the signatures. The interview data also

aligned with the qualitative findings—of the six academics interviewed for the study, only two reported degree qualifications as essential information in their email signature. Additionally, 13% included professional qualification titles that usually follow academic degree titles, such as the UK's Fellowship of Higher Education Academy or other recognitions from professional organizations. Overall, it can be concluded that the inclusion of degree and professional qualifications may be interpreted as a relatively weak indicator of credibility among academics to highlight positioning.

Regarding administrative roles, the analysis revealed that less than half of the signatures (43.5%) included this information category. The most frequently observed role was Programme Director (17.5%) followed by Head of Department (9%), and Director of Research Centre (6%). These findings suggest that roles that are higher up in the academic ladder are more likely to be displayed in email signatures, indexing authority, and credibility. In addition to institutional internal roles, a small percentage of the corpus mentioned an external role, of which journal editorships were mentioned in 12% of the signatures. All the academics interviewed made some reference to the inclusion of academic roles and responsibilities. An associate professor noted that this information helps the recipient of the email know who they are dealing with. A full professor highlighted the importance of administrative roles in effective communication and how the signature needs to answer basic questions:

> "OK, well, how do I get in touch with this person?" Or "Who is this person? So, you get an email, and you want to be able to look at the signatures and say "OK, who is this person?", you know? What is their position?" or "What is their job?"

It seems that academic roles constitute an important part of academic identity for some academics—perhaps fulfilling an instrumental function as to what they do within their institutions and how they can assist other colleagues. That being said, 56.5% of academics do not include their administrative roles in their email signatures, indicating that institutional frames of proximity or identities at the administration level are less likely to be highlighted. This might be attributed to the locality of these roles within the institution and bearing little or no relevance to the wider academic community. It could also be the fact that at the time of producing the signature they did not hold such a role, or the role was not seen as particularly significant.

Contact information which is generally the core component of email signatures was included in the corpus with varying frequencies, as shown in Table 1. Much of the corpus included institution names (95%) followed by the corresponding postal address (79%). The departmental affiliations were included more frequently than those of School or College. In terms of communication media, telephone numbers appeared in more than half of the corpus followed by email, and a small percentage still included fax numbers. An interesting finding to note here is that postal address still appears to be a core component of email signatures in the corpus though the use of post and letters has significantly declined since the advent of emails. We argue that it is rather a conventional move of email signature with minimal practicality given that in today's digitalized practices in all academic domains, it is less likely for someone to need the postal address of an academic.

Digital presence referring to the online visibility of academics that is in either institutional or personal form is an important emerging move in email signatures. As can be seen from the frequencies of both forms displayed in Table 1, institutional digital presence indicated by links to institutional webpages, social media accounts, and websites was more frequently found in the corpus than personal digital presence involving personal websites, academic social media accounts, and blogs. This might be attributed to the institutional support provided to academics with respect to digital presence, as academics are more likely to have institutional digital presence before having a personal website. In addition, some academics may only use such institutional forms of digital presence without a personal website, blog, or social media account. Institutional digital presence can also signify proximity as being an employee of an academic institution can highlight an academic's credibility within the academic community. Among the three forms of institutional digital presence forms, the inclusion of person profiles on institutional homepages

was more frequent (55%) than general institutional websites or institutional social media sites. This finding is supported by some of the academics interviewed. For example, one associate professor and one full professor considered including the link to their profile on the University webpage essential. As regards personal digital presence, and inclusion of personal social media information (13.5%) was more frequently observed than personal websites (7.5%). The most common type of social media mentioned was Twitter/X by 7.5% followed by Academia.edu (2.5%). Another form of individual digital presence indicator was the inclusion of digital academic profiles. Though not frequently observed, ORCID numbers were included in 3.5% of the signatures.

Another emerging section in academic email signatures pertains to academic achievements. Listing at least one publication in the form of a bibliographic reference usually towards the end of the signature is found in 17.5% of the signatures. While many of these signatures included only one publication (8%), there were others that included 2 (7%) and 3 (1.5%) and some even 4, 6, or 7 publications. Additionally, 10.5% of the corpus included information about grants and projects usually in the closing of the signatures. The interviews conducted with academics revealed mixed feelings about this practice. An early career academic who is in favour of including a brief list of the most recent works following the email signature believed that it:

> 'is an effective way of promoting research and it is likely that recipients may be directed to read/buy one's work/book(s) after seeing this within an email, especially if there are links included' and 'could be useful for early career academics/researchers whose work may not be as widely known as that of more senior and established academics/researchers who may actually not need to showcase their work using email communication'.

One lecturer said that listing publications in the email signature is not necessary as they 'can easily be accessible through one's profile at the university's website or on some websites that are designed for this purpose (e.g. Google Scholar, Academia, ResearchGate, etc.)'. A professor highlighted some negative effects of this practice on email communication:

> "…I don't particularly like when people put sort of a list of their publications after as a way of self-promotion from the email. So, if you want to promote yourself in email, make that the email --that's the email – like, "I wrote a new book", "Here's my new book, buy it". That's the email, right? That way I know that's the email, that's the subject of the email, yeah? But if there's stuff in the email that's intended for me in some indirect way, that is not the subject of the email, I find that to be a little bit distracting."

While the inclusion of information such as recent publications might not be relevant to the actual communicative purpose of an email message and could therefore be seen as distracting, explicit promotion of one's own work as suggested in the quote above might not be something that many academics might feel comfortable doing. Given that almost a fifth of signatures mentioned at least one publication, it seems that the email signature genre is increasingly utilized to promote albeit in more indirect ways one's academic accomplishments to highlight their authority and credibility in the field.

Finally, several signatures were included in the closing section some multimodal texts involving images or logos (10%) often accompanied by some texts. The most typical image was the institutional logo (6%), followed by academic achievements in the form of published book cover images (1%) awards (1%) and other related images (2%). The academics we interviewed were generally in favour of adding visual and multimodal elements in email signatures. One professor commented that visual elements like a university logo, banner, or slogan as well as an image of a newly published book cover 'signal decorative, promotional and institutional part of the signature' and are the best form of promotion as 'it can actually be quite distracting or a little bit annoying to put a lot of words underneath that [signature]'. Though they were in favour of the use of visual elements in email signatures, two other academics noted the time demands in creating visually appealing signatures and how 'sometimes the signature is more striking than the

content of the email'. Another academic stated that branding or marketing types of information or indicators (e.g. logos like silver or gold plates indicating university rankings) are not necessary to include 'as these pieces of information are not directly relevant to what an academician does'.

Though not immediately related to academic achievements or identities, 16% of the signatures included messages focusing on the environment, institutional disclaimers as well as some personalized multimodal messages, for example, signalling the Covid vaccination status of an academic or their support for the LGBTQ+ movement. What these messages have in common is that they demonstrate academics' awareness and/or advocacy about social issues (Rains et al. 2009) or institutional policies. Also, in a small number of signatures in our sample, we found an inclusion of pronouns mostly in brackets following the person's name. Although this number is small and mentions of pronouns were found in more recent signatures, this is currently on the rise following campaigns for more inclusive language use. Some signatures included video links to external promotional web sources and some academics provided information about office or working hours, or about academic or non-academic affiliations or organizations. Information external to an academic's scholarly identity can signify important proximity to other non-scholarly communities and reveal more about the different identities that academics wish to project.

The impact of career stage on proximity and positioning in email signatures

To answer RQ2, a one-way between-groups MANOVA was performed to investigate the difference between career stages as independent variables (early-career, mid-career, established) regarding proximity and positioning as dependent variables in email signatures (Table 3). The multivariate normality was ascertained by the Box's test of the assumption of equality of covariance being non-significant ($p = 0.55 > 0.05$). Therefore, Pillai's trace was chosen as the multivariate statistic because it is considered accurate and robust when the co-variance matrices are homogenous (Field 2013). Levene's test equality of variances for each dependent variable was also non-significant, meaning that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was fulfilled.

The results showed that there was a significant effect of career stage on how email signatures highlight proximity and positioning, $V = 0.15$, $F(6, 39) = 5.34$, $p = < 0.001$. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately using univariate ANOVAs, there was a significant difference between career stages in terms of positioning, $F(3, 195) = 10.93$, $p = < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$, indicating a small effect size. An inspection of the mean scores indicated that mid-career academics had higher positioning in their email signatures ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.15$) than established ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.67$) and early-career academics ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.24$). However, no significant difference was found between career stage groups with respect to proximity $F(3, 195) = 0.898$, $p = 0.44$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. The result that mid-career academics do more *positioning work* in their signatures and highlight their academic achievements more than established academics is not

Table 3: MANOVA results for career stages and academic identity

Academic Identity	Levene's		MANOVA						
	F (3, 195)	*p*	Group	N	Mean	SD	*F*	*p*	η2
Proximity	.679	0.56	Early-career	56	4.77	1.50	0.898	0.44	0.01
			Mid-career	57	5.18	1.77			
			Established	47	5.06	2.10			
Positioning	2.51	0.059	Early-career	56	2.80	1.24	10.93	0.001	0.14
			Mid-career	57	3.05	1.15			
			Established	47	2.83	1.67			

Note: η^2 = partial eta squared.

surprising given that they are still in the process of developing their reputation in the field. Because of their mid-career status, they are also more likely to accrue more achievements and have therefore *more to display* than perhaps some early career academics. Although this is a broad generalization, it can partly explain why the latter group did less positioning work in our sample. The fact that established academics engage less in the practice of positioning might simply have to do with the fact that they have achieved a status and reputation in the field and there is less pressure on self-promoting their accomplishments—a finding noted in previous research (Harmon-Jones et al. 2009).

Changes in email signatures over the last decade (2011–2020)

To answer RQ3, a one-way between-groups MANOVA was performed to investigate the difference between the first half (2011–2015) and second half (2016–2020) of the last decade regarding proximity and positioning in email signatures (Table 4). Box's test of co-variance statistic being non-significant ($p = 0.16 > 0.05$) confirmed the multivariate normality. Levene's test equality of variances for proximity was non-significant; however, it was significant for the positioning variable, meaning that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not met for this variable. Pillai's trace was chosen as the multivariate statistic which is the most robust to violations of assumptions when the sample sizes are equal (Field 2013). Since both decade groups included the same number of signatures, it was assumed that Pillai's trace was still robust to the violation of multivariate normality.

The results showed that there was a significant effect of decade division on the use of proximity and positioning in email signatures, $V = 0.23$, $F(2, 197) = 30.39$, $p = < 0.001$. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately using univariate ANOVAs, there was no significant difference between the first and second halves of the decade in terms of proximity, $F(1, 198) = 0.002$, $p = 0.96$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$. An inspection of the mean scores indicated that the mean scores for proximity were nearly the same in both halves of the decade. However, there was a significant difference between the first and second half with respect to positioning $F(1, 198) = 60.24$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.23$, indicating a small effect size. An inspection of the mean scores for positioning indicated that it was in the second half of the decade that applied linguists used more positioning in their email signatures, which suggests that displaying and promoting personal academic achievements in email signatures is becoming something of a prevalent practice.

To explore what types of information categories have become more visible in relation to academics' positioning identity display over the last decade, we compared the positioning information category scores of the first and second half of the decade by running a series of independent samples *t*-tests. As displayed in Table 5, significant differences were found in the categories of multimodality (demonstrating positioning), digital personal presence, displaying of academic achievements in the form of publications and grants, and professional qualifications. The Cohen's *d* values for each information category indicate that the effect size is between medium to large.

Table 4: MANOVA results for the 2011–2015 and 2016–2020 groups

Academic identity	Levene's		MANOVA					
	F (1, 198)	*p*	Group	*N*	Mean	SD	*F*	*p*	η2
Proximity	0.724	0.39	First half (2011–2015	100	4.93	1.74	0.002	0.96	0.001
			Second half (2015–2020)	100	4.94	1.79			
Positioning	6.352	0.01	First half (2011–2015)	100	1.94	1.13	60.24	0.001	0.23
			Second half (2015–2020)	100	3.34	1.40			

Note: η^2 = partial eta squared.

Table 5: Change over time (2011–2020)

Information type	Group						
	First half (2011–2015) N = 100		Second half (2016–2020) N = 100				
	M	SD	M	SD	t	Sig	Cohen's *d*
Multimodality	0.16	0.39	0.44	0.70	−3.480	<0.001	−0.49
Digital Personal Presence	0.08	0.27	0.46	0.73	−4.873	<0.001	−0.68
Academic achievements	0.05	0.21	0.51	0.67	−6.002	<0.001	−0.91
Professional qualification	0.11	0.37	0.39	0.61	−3.879	<0.001	−0.54

Taken together, it seems that these moves have become more commonly included in the last five years suggesting that academics are drawing more on their academic accomplishments in their email signatures. This, in turn, lends support for self-branding and self-promotion as becoming a part or even a norm of this small digital genre.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has set out to investigate the emerging discursive practices in the email signatures of applied linguists focusing on the ways in which this small genre is used to construct and display academic identities via proximity and positioning. As the findings indicate, email signatures exhibit features of a genre evident in that most of the signatures in our sample follow the same or similar structure starting with a set of what we identified as core moves, which are then followed by optional ones, with each move performing a distinctive function. Units that form core moves include academic title (Dr or Prof.) followed by the first name and surname, and academic position or rank. The most commonly occurring position ranks were in our sample Professor and Associate Professor. Essential moves included also contact information, in which most of the signatures referred to the name of the HE institution, the name of the department, the postal address, and telephone number. The inclusion of at least one multimodal element occurred in more than 50% of the signatures in our sample. Optional moves identified as those occurring in less than half of the signatures included institutional administrative roles, professional qualifications and affiliations, academic degrees, indicators of digital presence and digital academic profiles as well as academic achievements specifically publications and research funded by grants.

As it is the case with other genres, email signatures are multifunctional. In addition to providing information about senders' general and academic identity, contact information, and academic position, they are also used to display and manage academic identities. While the core moves signal mostly *who* the academics *are* and where they are located, the optional ones index what *they do* or *have done*. In doing so, email signatures do not just signal the personal identity of the sender and their academic position. They are digital spaces which the senders use to establish a sense of authority, credibility, reputation, and status by documenting and showcasing their achieved or ongoing academic work.

Our findings expand Hyland's (2015) conceptualization of academic genre as a strategic exercise in positioning and proximity to academic email signatures as an example of a small digital genre. One striking result is that the kind of information which we are more likely to perceive as reputation building is 'on the rise' as more academics, especially those in mid-careers, focus more on positioning than proximity. These self-promotional efforts are strengthened multimodally by visual appeals creating a kind of personal brands. This indicates a growing need to 'stand out from the crowd', which prompts scholars in AL to engage in positioning work even in this

small digital space. We argue that this strategic exercise is likely a response to the mounting pressure caused by the pervasive neoliberal influences on HE, which compels academics to self-promote their work and achievements with the view to exhibit *compliance* with the norms of an i*deal* academic. This is evidenced by the fact that academics tend to display 'products' such as publications (especially those published in high-impact journals) and grants that are highly valued on the academic market and in various forms of research assessment. The fierce competition for scarce resources and a positional advantage in the neoliberal HE coupled with the increasing precarity of academic employment, especially in humanities that face ongoing existential threat, have created a situation in which self-promotional practices seem to be *sine qua non* for working and becoming successful in academia. The digital spaces with their ease of access and rapid dissemination to vast and diverse audiences have provided a 'fertile ground' for proliferation of such practices. Spending a considerable amount of time on creating and curating digital profiles and on documenting and sharing every little bit of what one is doing (as opposed to doing it) is now an additional task in response to the neoliberal demand for constant auditing, monitoring, and competing. While the digital practices enable academics to share their own work and for building connections and learning from others are beneficial to academics themselves and their communities, there is a need to reflect on those practices so that we do not end up locked in what Bartram (2020: 39) calls a 'performative panopticon' – an endlessly competitive cycle of self and other-surveillance.

As digital self-aggrandizement becomes an expected and normalized practice in academia, we need to consider how this practice affects the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the process of knowledge creation and academic advancement. New scholarly insights need to be communicated and shared within academic communities to foster knowledge exchange and scholarly connections, and digital spaces are useful platforms to do so. Yet, we need to be vigilant regarding the risks that might arise when only those who loudly and frequently engage in self-promotion in the digital realm, essentially conforming to the rules of the neo-liberal game, become the dominant participants in the knowledge creation and the main beneficiaries of the game, while those who feel uncomfortable with such practices and show resistance are marginalized and penalized. In their research on self-promotion, Scharff (2015) and Lund (2018) observe that gender plays a role in the extent to which professionals and academics engage in self-branding with women showing more reluctance to such practices causing them to miss out on the benefits that they generate. Lund (2018) argues that the world of academic self-presentation 'speaks to' and more readily performs what she calls a global masculinity—competitive, successful, and institutionally desirable. It is vital that what is considered important knowledge in our fields is not generated predominantly by those who fit this kind of mould.

Our sample of academic email signatures is still relatively small and collected only from one academic discipline—Applied Linguistics. Despite the smaller size and the fact that the studied signatures are quite varied in terms of the kinds of information academics choose to include in them, it is clear that certain trends and practices are gaining traction. Future research could, for example, include a larger sample of more recent signatures to see whether some of the smaller or larger patterns such as those around positioning work and/or inclusive language use are indeed becoming more widespread. It would also be interesting to explore in a cross-disciplinary way the extent to which the practices that we identified in email signatures in AL compared to the ones employed by scholars in other disciplines, especially those that are perhaps less affected by cuts in funding and precarity. Furthermore, our sample includes signatures collected from scholars working in universities in the US and the UK. Future research should consider email signatures produced in different national and cultural contexts to ascertain the extent to which such practices are becoming a global norm. While class and gender were outside of the scope of this paper, they might be linked to the extent to which academics engages in self-promotion, future work should explore identity work via proximity and positioning as a factor of gender and class and not just in email signatures but also in other commonly used social networking sites.

Notes on Contributors

Erhan Aslan is Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading. He earned his Ph.D. in Second Language Acquisition and Instructional Technology from the University of South Florida. His research interests broadly cover the multilingual, multicultural, and technologized practices of language and communication in changing societies and pedagogical contexts. His work on digital communication appeared in journals such as *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Internet Pragmatics*, *Pragmatics and Society*. He is also a co-author of *Language and Media* (Routledge, 2020). *Address for correspondence*: Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics, School of Humanities, University of Reading, Edith Morley Building, Office 210B Whiteknights Campus, Reading, Berkshire, RG6 6EL, UK. <erhan.aslan@reading.ac.uk>

Sylvia Jaworska Professor of Language and Professional Communication at the University of Reading, UK. Her research explores linguistic practices in professional settings, in particular in business, media and health communication, focusing on identity constructions and representations. She examines these areas using corpus linguistics, genre and discourse analysis and has published on the topics in *Applied Linguistics*, *Language in Society*, *Discourse and Society*, *Journal of Pragmatics* and many others. She is a co-author of *Language and Media* (Routledge, 2020).

APPENDIX

Semi-structured interview questions

1. How important is an email signature for you?
2. What kind of information do you include in your email signature and why?
3. What information is essential in an email signature and what kinds of information are not relevant from your point of view?
4. What benefit/value do you find in using email communication for showcasing your academic work?
5. What kinds of textual or visual elements do you use when you create your email signature and why?
6. Are there any institutional requirements that you are aware of and use when creating your email signature?
7. Do you have just one email signature or do you have different ones? If you have different ones, what kind of information do you include/exclude and why? Do you adjust your signatures or email signature settings depending on who you write to?
8. Do you read other academics' email signatures? Are there any practices that you find useful and adopt?
9. What are your thoughts and feelings about the kind of practices around email signatures that you noticed in the community of applied linguists?

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