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Exploring the collateral impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication:

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Exploring the collateral impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication:
Displaying affect in email discourse

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Abstract

The present study explores how the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped the linguistic patterns found in computed-mediated discourse, drawing on a corpus of emails written by university students and addressing their lecturers. The analysis shows that affect is a key component of the new stylistic practice that has emerged in email discourse during the pandemic and reveals the ways in which manifestations of empathy are linked to politeness strategies. The first part of the analysis targets lexical and grammatical features/structures that refer to the pandemic and well-being and display affect in email discourse, and it establishes a link between this stylistic practice and dominant public discourses about the pandemic. The second part of the analysis zooms in on a particular aspect of affect, i.e., empathy, and examines pertinent politeness strategies used by students. Moreover, an attempt is made to shed some light on the potential interplay between empathy, vulnerability, and politeness.

1. Introduction[1]

Despite medical experts' forecasts of a dull future of infectious diseases (Burnet & White 1972: 263), the 21st century kick started with a pandemic. The COVID-19 (or coronavirus) pandemic has had a huge impact on several aspects of social life, including extended lockdowns, shifting many activities online, transforming personal and moral relationships and entrenching class, gender, and racial discrimination (see e.g., Allen, Burns, Garrett et al. 2020; Horton 2020). Communication is another domain that has been affected by the pandemic. To date, there has been a number of studies focusing on the multilingual crisis communication raised by the COVID-19

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crisis (e.g., the dominance of Anglo-centric global mass communication and exclusion of linguistic minorities from public health information, see Zhang & Li 2020), xenophobic discourse around COVID-19 (Black 2020; Chun 2020), the figurative framing of COVID-19 discourse on Twitter and news articles (Wicke & Bolognesi 2020; Semino 2021), the relational work of expressive speech acts on public signs during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ogiermann & Bella 2021), and the embodied organization of social interactions during the pandemic (Mondada et al. 2020). Yet, little is known about the collateral impact of the pandemic on computer-mediated discourse. Our study aims to concentrate on a single genre of computer-mediated discourse, namely email-discourse. We report on a case study of emails written either in Greek or in English by undergraduate and postgraduate students addressing their lecturers during the COVID-19 pandemic in the School of English Language and Literature at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

Computer-mediated discourse (henceforth CMD) or computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC) is produced via digital technologies and media (Herring 2001, 2007) and includes, *inter alia*, email, text messages (SMS), chat, forums, blogs, tweets, and Facebook statuses. Following Herring's (2007) classification of the technological/medium facets of CMD, email is defined as asynchronous communication (i.e., participants are not online at the same time) that involves one-way message transmission (the recipient does not see the sender typing the message). With regard to the social/situational facets (Herring 2007) of the emails analyzed in this paper, participant structure is one-to-one, participant characteristics are fixed (gender, age, occupation), topic includes questions about assignments, exams and personal matters, and tone is more or less formal (more on this in section 2).

Previous research on email discourse has predominantly focused on structural and pragmatic features of online communication (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2006; Dürscheid & Frehner 2013) and language choice/code switching (e.g., Georgakopoulou 1997). Language of the Internet, also known as "netspeak" (Crystal 2006), that includes hybridity, emoticons, abbreviations, and non-standard spellings, is beyond the scope of the present paper. A number of studies have analyzed the politeness strategies deployed by university students in emails sent to faculty members to formulate requests and do facework (e.g., see Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Bella & Sifianou 2012). Our study builds on the latter research and targets the linguistic display of affect and its possible relation to politeness in emails written by students addressing their lecturers.

Affect or emotion refers to "feelings, moods, dispositions, and attitudes associated with persons and/or situations" (Ochs & Schieffelin 1989: 7). In their seminal paper on language and emotions, Ochs & Schiefflin (1989) provide a detailed list of lexical, grammatical, and discourse structures/features used to express affect across languages including pronouns, particles, reduplication, sound symbolism, taboo words, reference forms, and affective actions (e.g., teasing, insulting, assessing, joking, shaming, ridiculing). Studies within conversation analysis and interactional linguistics report additional resources for the design of affective actions in spoken interaction, such as syntactic clause types containing copular verbs and predicate nominals with evaluative and intensifying elements, response cries, and prosodic features (see e.g., Goodwin & Goodwin 1987, 1992; Wilkinson & Kitzinger

2006; Peräkylä & Sorjonen 2012). This paper focuses on the lexical and grammatical features that display affect and shows that such features form a distinctive stylistic practice in email discourse. In line with Eckert (2008: 456-457), we understand style as "a process of bricolage", in which "individual resources [...] can be interpreted and combined with other resources to construct a more complex meaningful entity". Our data reveal the interplay between affect, empathy, vulnerability, and politeness. Section 2 outlines the method of the present study. In Section 3 we describe the new stylistic practice that has emerged during the pandemic and show that the display of affect is a key component of this practice. Section 4 zooms in on a particular aspect of affect, i.e., empathy, and analyzes pertinent politeness strategies used by students. At the same time, it is demonstrated how manifestations of vulnerability, which often co-occur with manifestations of empathy in the data, can be linked to politeness strategies.

2. Method

21 undergraduate and postgraduate of the School of English Language and Literature at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki participated in the study, their age ranging from 20 to 40 years (average age: 22.6 years). 14 of the participants were female, 4 were male while 3 did not disclose their gender. The data elicitation tool in the present study was a survey created on Google Forms which was active from late December 2020 until the end of January 2021. Participants were asked to volunteer excerpts from emails sent to their lecturers in which they make direct or indirect references to the COVID-19 pandemic, by pasting them directly into the designated boxes on the Google Form. Each participant could submit up to 3 excerpts maximum. Confidentiality and data anonymization was of paramount importance and students were given specific instructions on how to delete/omit names and course titles. The survey also requested that a temporal indication be provided for each email excerpt in the form of MM/YY.

The participants volunteered 43 email excerpts in total, 34 of which were composed in English and 9 in Greek.[2] This slight variation was indeed expected as email communication between students and academic staff in the School of English can take place in either language. The data obtained cover a significant period of the COVID-19 pandemic; more precisely, they are excerpts from emails sent between March 2020 until January 2021. It should be noted that the undergraduate program offered by the School of English had been in distance-learning mode since March 2020, with all classes and exams taking place online.

3. Affect and the language of well-being in email discourse

In our corpus we have found lexical and grammatical features/structures that refer to the pandemic and well-being (cf. Aikhenvald 2019). These features are common in the opening phase of emails but may also occur in the medial and closing phase. The following patterns have been identified:

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[2] Translations into English are provided by means of footnotes throughout the data analysis in section 4.2. Please note that the English renderings may occasionally be marked/unnatural, as an attempt has been made to preserve the students' original lexical choices as much as possible.

i)   Value adjectives such as *healthy*, *strong* or *safe* that evaluate a person's state of well-being and usually appear in the predicate slot of an intransitive clause. These clauses serve as complement clauses of the verb phrase *I hope*.

ii) Value adjectives that appear in imperatives, such as *stay healthy* or *keep safe*.

iii) Formulations of reference to the pandemic that consist of negatively affective words, such as *these chaotic/tough/stressful times*.

Pattern (i) is illustrated with examples (1a-k) (items of interest are in bold):

(1)
   a. (male, 22) *I hope you are **well** and **safe***
   b. (female, 21) *I hope this email finds you **mentally** and **physically well***
   c. (female, 21) *Hello Dr XX, I hope that you are **healthy** and **strong***
   d. (female, 21) *Professor X, I hope you're **happy** and **healthy***
   e. (female, 20) *Dear Professor X, I hope you are **healthy** and **holding on**, given the circumstances*
   f. (female, 20) *Dear Dr X, I hope this email finds you **healthy** and **safe***
   g. (unknown) *Dear Dr X, I hope I find you **safe** and **sound***
   h. (female, 30) *I hope all is well with you, and that you've been **managing okay** during the pandemic*
   i. (unknown) *I hope you are managing well and staying **healthy** in the process*
   j. (unknown) *I forgot to ask you back in the call, I hope you are staying **healthy**.*
   k. (female, 40) *I hope you and your loved ones are staying **safe***

Pattern (ii) is illustrated with examples (2a-b):

(2)
   a. (female, 21) *Thank you in advance and **stay safe**!*
   b. (female, 20) *Thank you in advance and **stay healthy**!*

Pattern (iii) is illustrated with examples (3a-e):

(3)
   a. (male, 22) *Ελπίζω να είστε καλά δεδομένης **της πρωτόγνωρης κατάστασης*** ('I hope you are well given **the unprecedented circumstances**')
   b. (female, 20) *I hope you are doing well in **these chaotic times***
   c. (female, 20) *I am really sorry for troubling you during **these tough times***
   d. (female, 20) *I too hope you are doing well, and are holding on in **these stressful and challenging times***
   e. (female, 40) *First of all I hope you and your loved ones are staying safe or at least managing throughout **these unprecedented times***

The linguistic display of affect in email discourse constitutes a new stylistic norm, which is anchored in dominant public discourses about the pandemic. Following Foucault (1972: 49), discourses are defined as "practices which systematically form

the objects of which they speak" and in which language plays a central role. Here the focus is on the "medical" discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, which operates in conjunction with the "law and order" discourse (i.e., state regulations regarding public life and travel restrictions, etc.). We assume that these discourses define speakers' conceptualization of the pandemic and inform the stylistic choices they make. To decipher the public discourses on the COVID-19 pandemic we draw on framing and metaphor theory (Semino 2008, 2021; Semino, Demjén & Demmen 2018; Wicke & Bolognesi 2020).

Metaphors reflect and reinforce different ways of perceiving experience and making sense of the sociocultural world. This function of metaphor is known as "framing". According to Entman's (1993: 52) definition, "framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." For example, Semino, Demjén & Demmen (2018: 625) observe that the experience of being ill with cancer is often described as a "fight". In the expression *your fight against cancer* the word *fight* is a linguistic instantiation of the source domain WAR or VIOLENT CONFRONTATION (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980). The "fight", "war" or "military" metaphor (first described by Sontag 1979) provides a particular framing of the illness experience: the patient is placed in the role of fighter, and the disease is placed in the role of opponent, aggressor or enemy (Semino, Demjén & Demmen 2018: 626). The WAR figurative frame is found in public discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic. In a corpus of COVID-19 tweets, Wicke & Bolognesi (2020) identified lexical units for the WAR framing, such as *battle*, *battlefield*, *fight*, *fighter*, *war* and *warzone*.[3] A similar frame is often used in Greek public discourse around COVID-19, as shown in (4a) and (4b) (items of interest are in bold):

(4a) *Είμαστε σε **πόλεμο** με έναν **εχθρό** που είναι αόρατος αλλά δεν είναι ανίκητος.*
      'We are at **war** against an **enemy** who is invisible but not invincible.'
        (17.03.2020, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister of Greece)

(4b) *Ο **εχθρός** είναι ύπουλος και αόρατος. Να τον αντιμετωπίσουμε έτσι.*
      'The **enemy** is devious and invisible. We should treat him as such.'
      (30.03.2020, Sotiris Tsiodras, Physician and Government Liaison Officer for the COVID- 19 pandemic)

The conceptualization of COVID-19 as war or fight promotes our understanding of the pandemic as an opponent (who is often invisible and therefore perilous) and of people as fighters who try to avoid infection, stay healthy and safe. These framing implications account for campaign slogans such as "stay healthy at home" or "stay safe", as well as for the new stylistic practice used in email discourse (e.g., *I hope you are keeping safe, stay strong*). This practice encodes the conceptualization of the pandemic as an enemy and creates an economy of affect that is ideology-driven and

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[3] War metaphors were also used for the Zika epidemic in Brazil in 2015-2016 (Ribeiro et al. 2018).

infiltrates email discourse. In the next section, we examine how students deploy affective language to accomplish specific communicative goals.

4. Politeness strategies and manifestations of empathy and vulnerability
4.1 Theoretical preliminaries

Drawing on insights from politeness research (Brown & Levinson 1987; Bella & Sifianou 2012) as well as from studies on empathy displays in interaction (Kupetz 2014; Herlin & Visapää 2016; Powel & Roberts 2017), this section first and foremost explores politeness patterns and manifestations of empathy in the context of CMC between university students and teaching staff.

More specifically, an attempt will be made to answer the following set of research questions and test any relevant hypotheses as appropriate:

1. What are the politeness strategies used and what communicative goals do they serve?
2. Are there any manifestations of empathy and, if so, how are they linked with politeness?

The first research question examines the strategies students use in order to perform the speech acts anticipated in the sample given its institutional nature (e.g., greetings, wishes, requests) and the politeness orientation(s) evidenced therein. Notwithstanding the strong tendency to associate Greece with a positive politeness orientation, Sifianou cautions that "this should not be taken to mean that societies as a whole can be clearly labelled as being either positively or negatively polite"; in this light, she compares the "*relatively* more positive" politeness orientation in Greece to the "*relatively* more negative" in England (2001: 133; cf. 1992). Cross-cultural pragmatics research has indeed teased out similar tendencies in several cultures and speech communities while bringing into sharp relief the pivotal role of contextual factors, such as the mode and topic of interaction, the relationship between the interactants as well as individual differences (see Hickey & Stuart 2005). Several Greek scholars such as Georgakopoulou (1997), Georgakopoulou & Patrona (2000), Tzanne (2001), and Sifianou & Antonopoulou (2005) have argued for the need to keep findings as contextualized as possible, refraining from unwarranted generalizations. The study by Bella & Sifianou (2012) was the first attempt to shed light on the way(s) Greek students formulate their requests to Greek faculty members and on the politeness devices used to mitigate the imposition. Their 200-email sample included requests of different kinds pertaining, *inter alia*, to deadline extensions, reference letters, and grades. Apparently, the single most striking observation to emerge from the data analysis is the consistent use of formality and negative politeness devices for the sake of face management. These findings seem to confirm their main research hypothesis as reflected in the excerpt below:

> Formality is a feature found in other student/faculty e-mails but, unlike other cases, in the Greek context there are no examples of informal language. For instance, unlike England, where relatively informal teacher/student relationships prevail (Bargiela et al. 2002; Bousfield 2008: 94), it is unthinkable for Greek students, especially undergraduates, to use first name terms of address. (Bella & Sifianou 2012: 93)

The formulation of such a strong and crystallized research hypothesis in the present case study was considered rather risky not least due to its intrinsic particularities and also some additional variables that come into play. To begin with, email communication between students and lecturers in the School of English Language and Literature can take place in either Greek or English; when English is chosen as the language of communication by two interactants who share Greek as their native language, we are dealing with a fairly idiosyncratic yet very interesting communicative event which allows for the collision or co-deployment of politeness norms from both languages. Therefore, although indeed a reasonable amount of formality and negative politeness devices is clearly to be expected, not least because of the power differential and the prevalent norms of communication in Greek higher education institutions, we could by no means ignore the potential influence of the relatively more positive politeness patterns and informality that generally appear to characterize email communication between teachers and students in England. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic may motivate students to "claim common ground" and/or simply "be optimistic", both of which are described as positive politeness strategies by Brown & Levinson (1987).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic brings us to the second research question which investigates the link between politeness and empathy as well as the possibility of any identifiable manifestations of the latter in the data set. At first glance, it seems that displaying empathy does not feature as such among the fifteen positive politeness strategies listed by Brown & Levinson (1987: 101-127). Upon closer inspection, though, it can be claimed that aspects of this complex psychological construct can be found across their categorization, particularly under *Claiming common ground* ("exaggerate: interest/ sympathy with H" and "presuppose/raise/assert common ground") and also, perhaps, under *Convey that S and H are cooperators* ("assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants" and "assume or assert reciprocity"). Indeed, in the fields of psychology and neuroscience empathy has been associated with the concepts of sympathy/concern (Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas 2010) and perspective-taking (Lamm, Batson & Decety 2007). A key distinction is drawn between *cognitive empathy* and *emotional/affective* empathy based on Ekman's (2003) influential tripartite categorization, which also includes *compassionate empathy*. As Powell & Roberts (2017: 138) explain, "in cognitive empathy we recognise what another person is feeling, in emotional empathy we actually feel what that person is feeling, and in compassionate empathy we want to help the other person deal with his[/her] situation and his[/her/ emotions]".

Linguistic research on empathy is extremely scarce. It seems that two of the most recent studies are those by Kuperz (2014) and Herlin & Visapää (2015), both analyzing video recordings of naturally occurring face-to-face conversations from a perspective inspired primarily by CA[4]. Kuperz (2014) additionally adopts a multimodal approach, which enables her to account for empathy displays through verbal, non-verbal, and extra linguistic means. To the best of our knowledge, there appear to be no studies within linguistics specifically designed to explore empathy in

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[4] For an earlier CA approach to empathy in interaction see Heritage (2011).

email communication or CMC in general. The rather nihilistic and absolute view of CMC "as emotionally barren, lacking the nonverbal channels necessary for intimate interpersonal communications" has been challenged by recent research on social networking sites which suggests that people can develop empathic relationships online; still, very little is known about the nature and situational determinants of "digital empathy" (Powell & Roberts 2017: 137). Powel & Roberts' (2017) study represents one of the few attempts to occupy this research niche by elucidating how university students experience empathy in various modes of digital interaction, such as text messaging, instant messaging, snap chat, and email. The results indicated that participants experienced all three kinds of empathy albeit in different degrees, with cognitive empathy being experienced most frequently followed, as estimated, by affective and compassionate empathy. Another noteworthy set of findings pertains to social distance, the frequency of communication and, importantly, the mode of CMC *per se* (Powell & Roberts 2017: 145):

> When holding all other variables constant, the number of communications in an interaction and interacting with a person who was interpersonally close (i.e., a partner or family member vs. a friend) were positively associated with all three empathy types; while using email (vs. text messaging), interacting with a person who was interpersonally remote (i.e., a work/university contact), and talking about yourself (vs. a mutual subject) negatively predicted all three types.

Taking the above under consideration, one would be inclined to expect empathy to be hardly ever manifested in emails sent by university students to their lecturers. However, as the emails comprising the data set in the present case study were composed and received amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and, importantly, touched upon the latter in one way or another, we can safely assume that there will be at least some recognizable evidence of cognitive empathy.

Apart from attested manifestations of cognitive empathy, section 4.2 also presents some linguistic realizations of vulnerability observable in the data, which, interestingly enough, can be linked to both empathy and politeness.

4.2 Data analysis

Despite the relatively small sample, consisting of 43 email excepts in total, a fairly wide variety of speech acts can be observed. Most of them were highly anticipated given the nature of the communication and standard academic issues that are most likely to emerge; this category includes wishes, greetings, giving thanks, apologies, and requests (cf. Bella & Sifianou 2012); instances thereof will be discussed in relation to politeness strategies at a later stage. For now, let us concentrate on some rather unexpected speech act types that have been identified:

(5)
    a. *If you find it inconvenient to answer to all the questions we can take advantage of technology and communicate via skype or any other medium that suits you.*

    b. *I thought you would be interested in this: Z recently opened a YouTube channel full of lectures on G. [link] Maybe you would like to check it out. It*

> *seems like a great tool and maybe it will also help us in this semester in our X class!*

c. *Stay safe from mass propaganda and guard yourself at all times [laughing emoji].*

All three examples can be considered FTAs as they potentially pose a threat to the addressee's negative face (Brown & Levinson 1987), even more so when the relationship between senders and receivers is asymmetrical. In (5a) and (5b), which illustrate invitations and suggestions, respectively, the students use both positive politeness (*we can take advantage of, it will also help us…in our class*) and negative politeness mainly in the form of hedging. By contrast, in example (5c) the FTA is performed bald on-record with no redressive action. Although, as discussed in section 3, offering advice in the interest of the addressee's health along the lines of *take care* and *stay/keep safe* has dominated both private and public discourse since the outbreak of COVID-19, the specific formulation of the first imperative construction (*stay safe from mass propaganda*) considerably increases the size of the imposition and, in combination with the laughing emoji at the end, render the style markedly informal.

Undoubtedly, formality is prevalent across the sample, manifested mainly through the remarkably consistent use of deference markers, including address forms and honorifics (e.g., *Dear Dr/Prof.*, *Αγαπητή κυρία* ('Dear Ms.)') and the formal plural V-form in Greek, as well other negative politeness strategies such as being thankful and/or apologizing for the imposition (e.g., *thank you for your time*, *thank you in advance*, *ευχαριστώ και συγγνώμη* 'thank you and I am sorry', *apologies for today's performance*).

Nevertheless, the data analysis also showed evidence of informality, which albeit occasional, is not negligible. In addition to example (5c) above, consider the following:

d. *Αγαπημένη Δρ Χ[5]*

ελπίζω να είστε καλά (κυρίως ψυχικά). Σε περίπτωση που το e-mail δεν το προδίδει, είμαι ο Χ. Και θέλω, και μπορώ και ανυπομονώ να τα πούμε online, αν φυσικά συμφωνήσει και η υπόλοιπη ομάδα. Ευχαριστούμε για ακόμη μία φορά για τη συνεχή ενημέρωση, προτροπή και όμορφη διάθεση. Θα περιμένω νέα σας.

Υ.Γ. Έκρινα πως έπρεπε να χρησιμοποιήσω ένα λιγότερο τυπικό μα περισσότερο φιλικό ύφος στο mail καθώς αυτό θεωρώ πως αρμόζει μεταξύ φίλων. Να είστε καλά και να προσέχετε.

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[5] *Beloved Dr X, hope you are well (mainly mentally). In case the email does not betray my identity, I am X. I am more than willing and able to meet online, [in fact] I cannot wait, if the rest of the team also agrees, of course. Thank you once more for the constant updates, encouragement, and nice mood. P.S. I reckoned I had to use a less formal but friendlier style in my mail, as I consider it more appropriate between friends. Be well and take care.*

The rather surprising finding here resides in the post-scriptum which can be translated into English *as I reckoned I had to use a less formal but friendlier style in the mail, as I consider it more appropriate between friends. Thank you and take care.* Due to lack of context (and perhaps, also co-text) we cannot ascertain the precise rationale underlying the inclusion of this post-scriptum, particularly because the student has systematically employed most deference markers outlined above with the exception of *Αγαπημένη Δρ Χ* ('Beloved Dr X') instead of the more formal *Αγαπητή Δρ Χ.* ('Dear Dr X'). By "friendlier style", the student may also be referring to the opening of the email "I hope you are well (mainly mentally/psychologically)". Regardless of the precise reasons, though, what emerges here is that the student felt the need to justify even those minor deviations from the formality norm. Equally important is that by doing so, he makes a clear claim of closeness.

This case represents a recurrent theme in our sample; students have often been found to make claims of closeness/emotional intimacy albeit in different degrees and through different means. In section 4.1, we established demonstrating empathy as a positive politeness strategy as per Brown & Levinson (1987). Verifying our relevant hypothesis, the data analysis revealed several manifestations of *cognitive empathy*, which appears to be intimately linked with claiming common ground, thus construing closeness and solidarity, as illustrated in the subsequent examples (also evident in the examples discussed in section 3):

(6)
   a. *Ελπίζω να είστε καλά μέσα σε όλη την αναστάτωση που μας έχει βρει.*[6]
   b. *I have just noticed that the lesson hour of X has changed. I hope you are safe and sound and of course I can relate to schedule ups and downs. The pandemic has made us all change bits and pieces of our everyday life and work schedule*
   c. *As I am sure most of my fellow students find themselves in the same situation, I left Thessaloniki in a rush while leaving for my hometown due to the outbreak.*
   d. *Δεν μπορώ να δουλέψω ούτε να αποδώσω όπως θέλω και αν χρειάζεται, τα κάνω με το ζόρι...Σας το λέω για να ξέρετε γενικά πως περνάμε πολλοί φοιτητές αυτό το πρόβλημα και πιστεύω πως το καταλαβαίνετε κι εσείς.*[7]

The common denominator in all these examples seems to be the shared knowledge of collateral effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. One might be tempted to argue there is possible evidence of affective empathy, as well. However, because the present case study is not specifically designed to determine whether and how students experience affective empathy or measure it, for that matter, we would like to restrict the scope of the analysis to the recognition of cognitive empathy.[8] Owing

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[6] *I hope you are doing well despite all this upheaval that has befallen us.*

[7] *I can neither work nor perform as I would have liked to and if I have to I [just] force myself… I am telling you this so that you know that it is many of us students who are facing this problem and I believe you understand this too.*

[8] Measuring affective empathy is beyond the scope of the present study; defined as not only understanding how someone is feeling but also feeling it (Ekman 2003), affective empathy requires specific methodological tools for its measurement. Such tools designed to probe the mirroring of others' feelings have been used by Kuperz (2014) and Powell & Roberts (2017).

to its more superficial nature, the latter can be readily attested, for instance, by the sheer presence of perspective-taking constructions such *I can relate to* and the mental verb *understand* (cf. Kuperz 2014). Another interesting observation pertains to the fact that as opposed to examples (6a) and (6b) which are considered to display empathy towards the addressee, in (6c) and (6d) empathy is apparently directed towards the students' classmates. What is more, the composer of (6d), after empathizing with the academic struggles of his/her classmates, makes an assumption about the lecturer's empathic skills (*I am telling you this so that you know it is many of us students who are facing this problem and I believe you understand this too*).

The noticeable presence of cognitive empathy in the present study, evidence of which can be observed in 22 out of the 43 instances comprising the data set, is partly contrary to the results of Powel & Roberts (2017: 145). The latter negatively predicted all three types of empathy in email communication where the addressee is interpersonally remote (e.g., a University contact) and when the sender talks about herself/himself instead of a common topic. As mentioned above, the most likely explanation for this finding resides in the fact that our sample consists of emails that were sent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as in the specific requirement that participants volunteer emails including direct or indirect references to the pandemic, which seem to be the overriding factors here. The topic variable may have also played a key role as in most instances of cognitive empathy the senders talked about a mutual subject to a greater or a lesser extent rather than about themselves (cf. Kupetz 2014; Herlin & Visapää 2016).

It is, therefore, highly likely that cognitive empathy is observable more frequently when the focus of the communication is a shared object of concern but what happens when the sender concentrates more on his/her own trials and tribulations often in a long-winded email? Six out of the 43 email excepts comprising the data set are excellent cases in point; as the original submissions are quite long, only their most representative parts are provided here:

(7)

a. *The thing is, that the last few months I am experiencing some extreme difficulties with my personal life (apart from the pandemia) and due to the school's obligations as well as my professional ones, I never had nor have the time to rest, give sometime to myself to resolve them and move on. (…) I feel sorry for disappointing you, but I really try my best even under those circumstances. I am sure that sooner or later I will come around.*

b. *I would also like to thank you for your kind words today after the announcement of the lockdown in Thessaloniki, they were truly touching. Even though I started panicking at the realization of the situation, you honestly calmed me down and helped me remember the valuable things in life, and I thank you for that.*

c. *Όσο για τα Χ θέλω πολύ να ασχοληθώ και δε θέλω τώρα να τα διαβάσω απλά για να τα δώσω…Θέλω ακόμα να συμμετάσχω στις εργασίες και θα το κάνω! Ακόμα και τα assignments που βάζετε ξέρω πάρα πολύ ότι είναι για δική μας βοήθεια και το εκτιμώ πάρα πολύ and I'm getting emotional right*

now απλά δεν τραβάει άλλο έτσι...Θα προσπαθήσω πολύ να ανταποδώσω τον Σεπτέμβρη! Ευχαριστώ και συγγνώμη![9]

d. *Due to the fact that we have been dealing with the online teaching and online exams for the first time, I must confess that keeping up with the classes –or even e-mails– was not easy for me in Spring Semester 2020. The pandemic itself is tough to handle especially if one is dealing with health problems, family problems or everyday work.*

e. *I am having a very hard time mentally with covid and the day of our session I received some bad news. I understand that it is my responsibility to contact you in time, but I was not expecting anything so disruptive to occur. I have not asked for any further guidelines on the paper, just to simply submit it and get graded for it.*

f. *Λόγω της παρούσας κατάστασης του κορωνοϊού δεν είμαι ιδιαίτερα παρών στην πανεπιστημιακή ζωή και καταλαβαίνω πως με έχει καταστρέψει, αλλά δεν μπορώ να αποδίδω όπως θέλω. Προφανώς όλα αυτά είναι δικαιολογίες αλλά και να μην ήταν, πάλι σε μειονεκτική θέση είμαι.*[10]

According to Bella & Sifianou (2012: 110), students tend to write lengthy emails replete with grounders and other supportive moves when requesting reference letters and deadline extensions; by contrast, in other types of requests (e.g., for information), which presumably pose less of a threat to their positive face, negative politeness devices are less dominant. Our findings, however, are not completely in line with those reported by Bella & Sifianou (2012). First, although it seems that there might be a strong link between email length and deadline extension requests, lengthy emails can be composed for other purposes as well. Out of the six examples above (which represent the longest email excerpts in the data set) only (7e) and (7f) concern requests for a coursework deadline extension, while (7d) illustrates a request for information about online exams. On the other hand, in the first three examples, no requestive intention is discernible; students felt the need to explain poor performance in class (7a), thank the lecturer for his/her encouragement and moral support (7b), and inform the lecturer that they will sit the September rather than the June offering their reasons (7c). Secondly, the use of grounders is certainly not restricted to (7e) and (7f). Similarly, negative politeness strategies can be observed in all six cases, occasionally combined with positive politeness, such as demonstrating optimism (*I am sure that sooner or later I will come around*) or off-record politeness (e.g., *I understand that this has taken its toll on me but I cannot perform as I would have liked to. Obviously, these are all excuses but even if they aren't I am still at a disadvantage*).

Furthermore, all excerpts apart from (7b) exemplify what Chen (2001) refers to as *self-politeness*. As Bella & Sifianou (2012: 100), who also found evidence of self-

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[9] *Regarding X, I really want to do the work and I don't want to study just so that I can sit the exam… I still want to take part in the coursework and I will! I also know very well that even any assignments you give us are intended to help us and I very much appreciate this and I'm getting emotional right now it's just that I cannot do this any longer… I will try my best to make it up in September! Thanks and I am sorry!*

[10] *Due to the current Covid situation I have not been very present in university life and I understand that this has taken its toll on me but I cannot perform as I would have liked to. Obviously, these are all excuses but even if they aren't I am still at a disadvantage.*

politeness in their corpus, explain, "the student risks his[/her] own positive face which [s/]he simultaneously tries to save by mentioning an unavoidable problem". Put differently, in the context of this study, s/he presents him/herself as a committed and conscientious student who admits his/her failure to submit the coursework by the given deadline, difficulty participating in class or coming to grips with distance learning and online exams but attributes it to complications caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly enough, though, the students here do more than just admit their failures and difficulties; they reveal personal information about sensitive topics such as mental health. Emotional exposure along with risk and uncertainty are the defining features of vulnerability and demonstrating the latter has been found to help people overcome feelings of guilt and shame (Brown 2006). Thus, all six students construct vulnerability in their own way.

Partly sharing Brown's sociological perspective, Coates (2003: 341) touches upon the relationship between hedging and vulnerability as follows:

> Disclosing personal information is always risky, but is an important element in close relationships, because self-disclosure normally produces matching self-disclosure from others, which promotes close bonds […]. But because self-disclosure involves highly personal material, utterances need to be softened.

Although hedging (e.g., *the thing is*) and, to a lesser extent, off record politeness in the form of ambiguous and vague statements (Brown & Levinson 1987) are woven into affective and evaluative language (*truly touching*, *extreme difficulties*, *I am getting emotional right now*) in the students' accounts, Coate's argument is not wholly applicable to our data because of the social distance, power differential, and the ensuing formality generally characterizing interactions between lecturers and students. Vulnerability involves sharing feelings and experiences with people who have earned the right to hear them and, thus, is far more likely to emerge in relationships where a certain degree of intimacy and trust is already established (Brown 2006). In this light, oversharing threatens the addressee's negative face since it may cause feelings of embarrassment, uneasiness, and/or discomfort, as Coates (2003) suggests, while at the same time jeopardizing the sender's positive face, as the latter runs the risk of being perceived as manipulative (cf. Held 1989; Bella & Sifianou 2012). Thus, it could be argued that self-politeness can be considered as a means of redressive action, while simultaneously making a claim of cognitive empathy on the recipients' part. In the afore-presented instances, manifestations of vulnerability have been found to co-occur with both positive politeness strategies (e.g., promising, being optimistic) as well as negative politeness strategies (being pessimistic, apologizing, etc.). Besides, as Sorlin (2017) demonstrates, "manipulative strategies are parasitic on positive and negative politeness strategies", which leads us to the "dark alleys of strategic communication" (cf. Austin 1990; Sifianou 2012; Holmes & Stubbe 2014). It would appear then that vulnerability, not unlike politeness, potentially has a dark side, as well. The same applies to cognitive empathy, which can be deliberately employed for "darker" purposes such as manipulation and exploitation (Wai & Tiliopoulos 2012). Nevertheless, it is our firm contention that analysts should ascribe such ulterior motives with extreme caution and only in the presence of substantial corroborating evidence.

5. Concluding remarks

To sum up, our study sheds light on the new stylistic practice deployed by university students in emails addressing their lecturers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece and reveals the ways in which manifestations of empathy are linked with politeness strategies. Despite the positive politeness orientation conveyed by students' stylistic choices, it is questionable whether the latter actually make recipients feel good about themselves. As Sontag (1979) and Semino et al. (2017) have pointed out, war metaphors around disease increase anxiety, helplessness, and guilt among patients. According to Semino, Demjén & Demmen (2018: 635), "being cured, or living longer, are construed as winning the fight, while not recovering or dying correspond to losing". In the same spirit, we may ask: What is the emotional response of recipients who do not feel strong or safe because they got sick with COVID-19? Do they perceive themselves as soldiers who failed in the battlefield? The imperative of being well, safe, and happy can provoke feelings of stress and disempowerment and covertly reproduce social stigma for those who were or are ill in the midst of the pandemic.

The empirical observations in this study ultimately seek to provide a new understanding of politeness patterns in email communication between students and lecturers amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The study overall confirms the results of Bella & Sifianou (2012) regarding the consistent use of deference markers, including address forms, honorifics, and the formal plural V-form in Greek, as well other negative politeness strategies (e.g., being thankful and/or apologizing for any imposition). However, some of our observations seem to somehow challenge their conclusion that the linguistic status quo in Greek higher education institutions leads students to the assumption that a demonstrably high level of formality is a *sine qua non* across the board. One of the most intriguing findings of this study is the claim of closeness and solidarity that students often make mainly through the use of positive politeness strategies such as demonstrating cognitive empathy, as well as through occasionally being vulnerable. Ascertaining whether and to what extent this claim for emotional intimacy is indeed acceptable, reciprocated, or even encouraged by the addressee, in the first place, falls outside the scope of the present case study. Arguably, the exceptional circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic emerge as a plausible explanation for these closeness and solidarity construals. More research in the context of institutional academic email communication, involving larger samples and additional methods (e.g., interviews), would help us establish a greater degree of accuracy on this matter and, possibly, also bring into sharp relief the potential influence of other variables such as age, gender, organizational culture, and personality of the interactants.

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