Representing academic identities in email: Content and structure of Automatic Signatures[1]

This paper analyses the automatic email signatures (ASs) of 200 academics. Qualitative and quantitative analyses of the ASs reveal that they are often written in one language, and only occasionally in two, English being a frequent choice. The ASs contain information with a primarily identificatory function, and occasionally with a promotional and socialising function. Despite the absence of clearly compulsory components, a typical structure can be identified in the ASs, which includes a specification of the writers' identity, reference to their affiliation, mention of their achievements, and an indication on how they can be reached. Like other academic texts, the ASs examined are places of self-categorisation and self-identification, tools for presenting one's professional identity, which are developing as sites of self-promotion.

1. Introduction

Academic discourse serves three main communicative purposes: exchanging information among scholars, training novices, and informing/educating non-expert audiences. Yet, it also reveals academics' *personal* stance (Hyland 2005). For example, oral forms of communication (e.g. talks) let the emotive and conative dimensions of interaction emerge (Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas 2005; Fernandez-Polo 2018; Valeiras Jurado 2015). Also, certain "marginal" components of academic texts (e.g. acknowledgements, titles) offer writers a chance to reveal their attitude towards given topics (e.g. Busch-Lauer 2000). Finally, some (part-)genres (e.g. book blurbs, bionotes) represent scholars' identities as positioned within their disciplines, lending them credibility (Hyland 2011b, 11) and approval (Hyland and Tse 2012, 156). One such part-genre is the Automatic email Signature (AS), the unit of discourse that an email

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[1] The authors are jointly responsible for the design of the study. Author 1 wrote Sections 1, 3, 5 and 6. Author 2 wrote Sections 2 and 4.

writer may have automatically appended to her/his outgoing email messages.

A signature in general and an AS in particular have: an identificatory function, referring to the writer as the message sender (Davies 1994, 79); a textual function, marking the final boundary of the message body; an expressive function, signalling the negotiation of a personal relationship with the reader, depending on how it is encoded (e.g. as a name, initials) (Rau and Rau 2016, 20; Shipley and Schwalbe 2008, 108); and a representational function, asserting and reinforcing the writer' identity (Rau and Rau 2016, 21), professionalism and authority (Rains and Young 2006, 1046, 1056). A signature is an impression-management mini-text.

Despite their frequency, ASs may go unnoticed because they are short, not part of the gist of messages, and partly redundant, since the sender's identity is often specified in the email address (Huang 2016, 38; Waldvogel 2007, 459). Despite their textual and functional marginality, some studies have been carried out on ASs (see Section 2). However, none has focused on ASs by academics. We explore whether scholars' ASs are identity-building texts which meet self-promotional as well as informational needs. We address these questions: What language(s) are ASs written in and why? What kind of information do ASs comprise? What are the sequencing patterns of their components? What is their degree of variation? What motivates their patterns and degree of variation?

To contextualise our study, we overview the literature on signatures and related genres, and outline our research method. We then present and discuss the findings, and draw implications from them.

2. Literature review

This section reviews studies on email signatures and other texts used by academics to promote their scholarly identity.

2.1 Email signatures

The AS – or *(email) signature block* (Chen, Hu, and Sproat 1999; Shipley and Schwalbe 2008) – is largely described in handbooks on email writing, these texts generally targeting business contexts. Their authors know that "[w]hat you include in your signature has some effect on the recipient's perception of who you are and what you do" (Wallwork 2014, 18), which motivates their suggestions of what to include in ASs. Shipley and Schwalbe (2008) list the following typical components of the AS: full name, title, organisation, address, phone number, fax, email address, link to webpage, logo, conversation starter (e.g. quotations), free marketing (i.e. sentence advertising the latest products), and occasional relevant details (e.g. delayed replying due to the need to connect from an Internet café). With reference to job search emails, Rubin (2016) suggests including in one's AS classic and alternative (e.g. Facebook) contact information and links to webpages showing personal skills; he also stresses the importance of adjusting one's AS as the CV evolves.

A few academic studies analyse e-mail signatures in educational settings. Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch (2013) analysed a corpus of emails by Spanish undergraduate students and a comparable one in British English, and found that the signature was not felt to be a compulsory move of the closing sequence, especially when the students had introduced themselves in the opening sequence of the message. Rains and Young (2006) collected automatically appended email signatures from 193 organisational members, including members of educational institutions. The signatures analysed comprised the following elements: name of sender, professional title, name of organisation, education, work telephone number, organisational telephone number, mobile telephone number, home telephone number, fax, postal address, web address,

quote about the organisation, personal quote, legal information, and other miscellaneous information.

The above studies suggest that an AS has an identificatory function, since it informs the addressee of who the sender is, but also a broader referential function, since it informs the addressee of the sender's professional affiliation and work location. This information signals the sender's role in an organisation – thus building, or claiming, her/his status – and clarifies to the reader how she/he can be reached. The message sender is thus relieved from the tediousness of typing up that information with every message she/he needs to write, while the addressee can easily cut and paste a person's name and address onto another text, if need be, avoiding typos (Wallwork 2014). Furthermore, ASs may be personalised by including quotes or "other miscellaneous text" (Chen, Hu, and Sproat 1999, 347), as well as "artwork or animated gifs" (Krotz n.d.) to make the message more noticeable. Moreover, e-writers may also "create customized signatures for different outgoing messages" (Krotz n.d). However, in institutional emailing, an AS is personalised mostly through a careful selection of content, which includes what the e-writer perceives to be salient about her-/himself.

To the best of our knowledge, no study specifically focused on scholars' ASs is available. However, other academic genres that promote scholarly identity have been investigated; these include: bionotes (e.g. Hyland 2011b; Hyland and Tse 2012), personal profile statements (Brisk 2011), book blurbs (Douglas 2001; Gea Valor 2005), academics' personal webpages (e.g. Hess 2002; Dumont and Frindte 2005; Thoms and Thelwall 2005; Hyland 2011a), CVs (Blanchet 2016; Brisk 2011), profile cards (Blanchet 2016), business cards (Nielsen 1995) and blogs (e.g. Ewins 2005; Bubkova 2011; Barbour and Marshal 2012; Kirkup 2010; Luzón 2018; Dennen 2009).

2.2 Related genres

This section provides a description of other self-descriptive academic texts. These serve as terms of comparison for placing ASs in the picture of identity construction and projection.

2.2.1 Bionotes, profile statements, and book blurbs

Bionotes, profile statements and book blurbs are reviewed together due to their similarity in form, i.e. their being structured in short narrative paragraphs.

The bionote, or bio sketch, is the block of text including biographical information which accompanies a research article. As Hyland and Tse (2012) observe, it is crafted by the author of the article considering various contextual factors: the full list of one's personal achievements, the accomplishments the writer considers most relevant in the given context, what is likely to be recognized and approved by the other members of her/his disciplinary field, and the formal limitations offered by the given journal (e.g. number of words). The authors collected a corpus of 600 bionotes from Applied Linguistics, Electrical Engineering and Philosophy, and analysed it in terms of moves and process types. The corpus showed the following, mostly optional, moves: Employment (past or current job positions); Education (affiliations and qualifications); Research interests (past or current research projects); Publications; Community Service (e.g. editorial roles); Achievements (e.g. awards); Personal data (e.g. hobbies). Differences were observed across disciplines, genders and roles. Engineering emphasized educational and personal details more than the other two disciplines; men focused more on publications, achievements and service, and women on research interests and education; senior academics drew on a wider set of experiences and made ample use of relational processes to establish their academic status, while junior

academics presented "themselves as members of groups using attributive clauses" (164). All the authors of the bios "projected a predominantly academic identity" (157). The findings suggest that the bionote can be considered a descriptive statement of a scholar's identity "where academics stake a claim to a certain version of themselves for their peers and institutions" (156), presenting "a self-conscious and public recounting of a professional persona" (156).

The profile statement is the first component of a CV. It acts as a "headline advertisement" (Brisk 2011, 12), presenting the job applicant in a positive light, and describing her/his current role and skills (Brisk 2011).

The book blurb is a short statement about a book appearing on the book jacket or back-cover. It often includes its content and highlights, and biographical-promotional details about the book author (Douglas 2001), serving a promotional and curiosity-arousing function (Gea Valor 2005).

2.2.2 CVs, profile cards, and business cards

CVs, profile cards and business cards are reviewed together, as they are all self-marketing tools characterised by a schematic representation of the information.

The CV traces a schematic profile of a person's professional self so as to attract or impress a prospective employer (Blanchet 2016) and is "a true selling document" (Brisk 2011, 6). It typically comprises: a Personal Profile Statement; roles, responsibilities and achievements, possibly listed in reverse chronological order; skills and abilities; educational qualifications and ongoing personal development; and a section listing hobbies and interests (Brisk 2011).

Profile cards serve the same purposes as CVs, but are more succinct, appearing in the form of bullet points which sum up the qualities, competences or motivations characterising the applicant (Blanchet 2016).

The business card is a pocket-size printed document with a person's name, professional role and contact details; it is given to professional contacts to remind them of whom they have met and to enable them to resume contact in the future (Nielsen 1995), thus serving as marketing tools.[2]

2.2.3 Personal webpages

Personal webpages are a self-advertisement medium (Chandler 1988, as quoted in Hess 2002, 172). As with other electronic texts, webpages can take advantage of links to "demonstrate a network of connections" (Dumont and Frindte 2005, 75) and to show what kind of person one really is (Miller 1995).

Dumont and Frindte (2005) investigated the homepages of academic psychologists from four European countries. Their inductive analysis produced the following categorisation: Result-oriented research (current, finished, unpublished); Process-oriented research (unpublished research reports, research methods, software, information about negative results research); Publications (publication lists, full articles, preprints); Teaching (advanced information about courses, teaching material); Links (to research projects, academic institutions, colleagues' webpages); and Private data (i.e. personal information). The results suggest that psychologists' homepages project scholarly identities strongly focused on research, presenting items rewarded by the academic system.

Hyland (2011a) analysed 100 academic homepages from philosophy and physics. He identified the same moves found in bionotes (Hyland and Tse 2012), plus Contact details (Hyland 2011a). His analysis extended to hyperlinks, which included, in

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[2] See e.g. these texts: *Business card as marketing tool* (https://www.sciencedirect.com/search/advanced?pub=Dental%20Abstracts&cid=273482&tak=business%20card&volume=52&issue=2&page=97), and *Be Prepared to Share Your Business Card at All Times* (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/23258616/2016/14/9).

decreasing order of frequency: links to institutional information (i.e. webpages of the author's University or Department; 50.7%); "links associated directly with the identity of the authors themselves" (e.g. publications, conferences, or personal interests; 26.8%); links useful to students (18.4%), and disciplinary links (e.g. to pages of journal websites, professional associations; 4.1%). Though based on scales with different granularity and terminology, Hyland's (2011a) and Dumont and Frindte's (2005) results outline similar pictures. Hyland (2011a, 296) concludes that the online identities portrayed in the webpages examined show "something of the perceptions and values of academic communities as writers assemble a persona which draws on insider perceptions of what their disciplines find meaningful and important".

Furthermore, Thoms and Thelwall (2005) compared academics' personal homepages on the university website to homepages freely created by academics on the Web. Their data showed that, in both cases, "the identities of the individual are ultimately lost to the governmentality of the university" (n.p.).

Finally, Hess (2002) analysed the compositional aspects of eighteen personal homepages of faculty members within English language programmes, concluding that homepages "often reveal a struggle between personal and professional representation" (172) and "between institutional and personal control" (172).

2.2.4 Blogs

A blog is a personal online space structured as a list of dated posts in reverse chronological order, often including images and links to other blogs or webpages. By giving scholars the possibility to group desired items (e.g. announcements or comments on one's most recent publication) and connect them to other relevant contents, they help create a complex self-presentation (Ewins 2005; Bubkova 2011), and project the academic persona outside institutional boundaries (Barbour and Marshal 2012). They

also allow academics to experiment with new forms of dissemination of ideas and to engage discussions with their readers (Ewins 2005; Bubkova 2011). According to Kirkup (2010), academics engage in blogging to: write about one's subject and research in a personal, informal way; discuss ideas at the periphery of one's discipline; and talk about undiscussed aspects of the academic profession and environment. Similarly, Mewburn and Thomson (2013) observed that academics blog about cultural critique, research dissemination, academic practices and information, and, albeit infrequently, self-help, technical, teaching or career advice and personal matters.

In a study on blogs of research groups, Luzón (2018) observed that these provide information about research, activities and publications (of the group or its members), and members' achievements. Thus their authors "position themselves as competent and active researchers, connected with other members of their (global) disciplinary community" (36), and sometimes "present themselves as civic scientists concerned with societal issues and involved in science dissemination" (36). Blog-based communities of academics also exist (Dennen 2009), where academics, hidden behind pseudonyms, express personal views, interests and concerns.

To summarise, the above studies show that all the genres considered are sites of self-representation with informational and promotional goals.

3. Method

To conduct our study, we compiled a corpus of ASs. Between 2 December 2018 and 2 June 2019, we selected from our incoming email the messages that were sent by scholars and which contained an AS, that is, at least one or more of the following at the end of their email messages: the sender's full name (i.e. *Name Surname*), the sender's

full title (e.g. *Professor of French Literature*), the sender's affiliation (e.g. *Institute of Germanic Philology*). After collecting a given e-writer's AS, we no longer considered her/his future messages. The scholars whose ASs we collected work mostly in the area of the humanities (90%), and a few others in the social sciences (7.5%) and applied sciences (2.5%).

We saved the ASs to an Excel file, and familiarised ourselves with their content through repeated readings. Each of us intuitively identified and classified recurrent types of information units in them. As our work proceeded, we shared our observations and revised our classification until we were satisfied that it accounted for all the information units attested.

The ASs we collected varied in length and content. Table 1 exemplifies our classification of AS text segments, which occasionally realise more than one functional component at a time, while at other times occupy two or more lines of text.

Table 1: Categorisation of components in AS_001

AS contents	Classification
Prof. [Name Surname]	Title/Academic status + Name and surname
Head of the Doctoral Programme in Linguistic, Philologic, and Literary Sciences	Institutional appointment: home institution
DiSLL - University of Padova	Affiliation: specific + Affiliation: general
Via Beato Pellegrino 26 35137 Padova, ITALY Phone: +39-0498274972	Contact details
Office hours: Wed, 2pm	Housekeeping
(for updates and other personal info: http://www.disll.unipd.it/category/ruoli/personaledocente?key=77D04A7E9D6BB7EF250DA7034D840709)	Link: personal website
"Shakespeare, Caravaggio, and the Indistinct Regard"	Publications
www.routledge.com/9780815376347	Link: other

Next, we determined the frequency of occurrence and preferred sequencing of these information units. Given the small size of our corpus, we chose not to analyse the data quantitatively with statistical measures, looking for broad discursive patterns as indicative of trends in the construction of academic identities (cf. Hyland and Tse 2012, 158).

Finally, to partly explore the rationale of ASs, we contacted via email 17 e-writers whose ASs we had collected for their opinions on their ASs. We asked them: *How did/do you choose what to include in the automatic signature appended to the outgoing messages sent from your institutional email account? That is, what were/are your motivations, goals and/or general circumstances?* In the 16 replies we received, we manually identified the topics most frequently mentioned.

4. Findings

Our corpus consists of 200 ASs (8,039 words), 66% of which identify female scholars and 34% male scholars. Its size is in line with previous studies (Rains and Young 2006; Sherblom 1988). The average length of an AS is 40.2 words (min. 3, max. 212 words). Table 5 shows the dispersion of the length values of the ASs in number of words. About half are 21-to-40 words long, less than a fifth are up to 20 words long, and over a third are 41 words long or longer.

Table 5. Lengths of the ASs in number of words.

Length in words	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-100	>100	Total
No. of ASs	8	27	62	40	27	27	9	200
% of ASs	4	13.5	31.0	20.0	13.5	13.5	4.5	100

To examine the language the ASs were written in, we considered those sent by colleagues of whom we knew the discipline they work in, their mother tongue and their affiliation, either directly from their ASs or from other sources (e.g. our own

background knowledge, their websites). These comprised 176 ASs. Within this set, we

distinguished between the ASs written in one language (112, i.e. 63.6%) and those

written in two (64, i.e. 36.4%). In the former subset, the presence of a given language

co-occurs with one or more variables. One is the language of the country/institution in

which the e-writer lives/works (84.82%), as in this example by a Spanish scholar

specialising in Romance Philology in Germany, written in the language of the e-writer's

country and institution:

> Jun.-Prof. Dr. [Name Surname]
> Georg-August-Universität Göttingen
> Seminar für Romanische Philologie
> Didaktik des Spanischen
> https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/408593.html

Another is the writer's native language (66.07%), as in this example by an Italian

scholar, specialising in Spanish and Hispano-American Literature in Italy, written in the

e-writer's native tongue, which is also the language of the e-writer's country:

> [Name Surname]
> Professore Associato di Letteratura spagnola e ispanoamericana
> Presidente del corso di laurea in Lingue e letterature europee e americane
> Co-direttore di "Orillas. Rivista d'ispanistica"
> Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari (DISLL)
> Studio 202, Palazzo Calfura,
> Piazzetta G. Folena 1, 35137
> Università di Padova
> https://unipd.academia.edu/[NameSurname]

Another variable is the language of the discipline taught by the e-writer (26.79%). This

is the case of the AS by an Italian scholar specialising in English Linguistics in Italy,

written in the language of her/his discipline:

> Associate Professor of English Linguistics (L-LIN/12)
> University of Pisa
> Department of Philology, Literature, Linguistics
> Via S. Maria 67
> 56126 Pisa
> tel. 050 2215861

A final variable is English as a lingua franca (ELF; 4.5%), i.e. English whose use cannot

be attributed to any of the following: e-writer's native language, discipline or institution. An example is this AS by an Italian scholar specialising in Language Teaching in Italy:[3]

> [Name Surname], PhD
> Department of General Psychology
> Department of Political Science, Law and International Studies
> Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology
> [name.surname]@unipd.it

When considering the ASs written in two languages, we identified as the primary AS the one that encodes a higher number of words and as the secondary AS the one that is instantiated in fewer words.[4] The following example is an AS by an Italian scholar specialising in Japanese Studies in Italy, written in ELF as the primary language, and Italian as the secondary language:

> [Name Surname]
> Associate Professor
> Department of Humanities
> University of Salento
> Piazzetta Rizzo, 1
> 73100 Lecce, Italy

However, when the two languages encoded a highly similar number of words, we considered the primary language the one that appears first in the mini-text. This is the case of an AS by an Italian scholar specialising in Romance Philology, written in Italian as the primary language (i.e. her/his native language and the language of the country where she works), and ELF as the secondary language:

> [Name Surname]
> Professore Associato / Associate Professor
> SSD L-FIL-LET/09 - Filologia e Linguistica Romanza / Romance Philology and Linguistics
> Facoltà di Lettere
> Università degli Studi eCampus
> Via Isimbardi, 10 - 22060 Novedrate (CO)
> http://servizi.uniecampus.it/portale/schedadocente.aspx?docente=44415

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[3] This is the only AS whose language choice appears to be motivated by the use of ELF only.
[4] We only considered the textual-visual prominence of a given language in quantitative/sequential terms, without examining its possible conventional uses.

https://uniecampus.academia.edu/[NameSurname]
https://www.linkedin.com/pub/[name-surname]/63/b30/971

The reasons for the use of the primary and secondary language are one or more of the above-mentioned factors: one of the two languages may be the language of the sender's country or institution (59.38% vs 15.63%, respectively), the sender's native language (56.25% vs 18.75%), the language of the sender's discipline (32.81% vs 23.44%), ELF (42.19% vs 54.69%), and/or the language that indicates the sender's address (0.0% vs 26.56%). Irrespective of the language(s) the ASs are encoded in, they are all formulated through noun/prepositional phrases rather than full clauses, except in the Housekeeping and Viewpoints components, where complete messages are expressed.

We next explored the kind of information conveyed in all the ASs. We distinguished between *Common* components, i.e. the components that all senders could include, if they wanted to, because they refer to features or experiences that apply to all academics, and *Restricted* components, i.e. those that only some senders could include, depending on their personal/professional history.

We identified these common components:

- Name and surname

- Title (abbreviated)

- Academic status

- Disciplinary field

- Contact details

- Link: personal webpages (including blogs)

- Link: other (i.e. to non-personal webpages)

- ORCID

- Housekeeping (e.g. office hours; email rules)

- Viewpoints

The most prominent common component is the one revealing the sender's identity, that is, *Name and surname* (i.e. *Name [Middle name] Surname*). It is found in 93.5% of the ASs.

In over half of the ASs (57.0%) a *Title* (e.g. *Prof.; PhD*) appears next to, and often before, the sender's name; the title may be elaborate (e.g. *Prof.ᵃ Titular*); occasionally two or more titles may appear together (e.g. *B.A.Hons., MA., PhD.*).

A frequent and related component is the indication of the sender's *Academic status* (in 73.5% of the ASs), either in its abbreviated (e.g. *Dr.*) or full (e.g. *Senior Lecturer*) form. In the former case, this component coincides with the previous one, i.e. the *Title*.

Reference to the sender's *Disciplinary field*, whether listed by itself or embedded under the reference to her/his academic status, is found in 56.5% of the ASs. A discipline may be indicated through its specific term in one language, which is the most common choice (e.g. *Didaktik des Spanischen*), through the terms denoting it in two languages (e.g. *Storia economica/Economic History*) or through a combination of alphanumeric codes and terms, in one or two languages (e.g. *L-LIN/02 - Didattica delle Lingue Moderne*).

Contact details are found in 77.0% of the ASs. They consist of one or more of the following: name of the sender's department/institute/school; name of the sender's university; postal address; e-mail address; skype address; and phone/fax numbers.

Link: other is a component instantiated only in 25.5% of the ASs; these are typically links to the sender's university or department websites, websites of projects or journals the e-writer is involved in, or of organisations she/he is a member of.

Link: personal webpages is the component through which one can reach the e-writer's personal website or blog. This is found in 30.5% of the ASs.

Mentions of the senders' *ORCID* numbers apply to 6.0% of the ASs.

Under the heading of *Housekeeping* we included references to logistical aspects of the sender's job, such as her/his handling of office hours and email communication (e.g. *You can book a consultation time with me here: [...]*). This is limited to 4.0% of the ASs.

Finally, 3.0% of the ASs express the e-writers' *Viewpoints* on given issues, manifested through quotes or proverbs (e.g. *«rem tene, verba sequentur»*). The *Restricted* components of the ASs include various notions:

- Affiliation: general (e.g. University)

- Affiliation: specific (e.g. Department/School/Degree/Institute)

- Publications (academic ones only, including forthcoming ones)

- Projects (e.g. conferences, workshops; including forthcoming ones)

- Institutional appointment: home institution

- Institutional appointment: external

- Other professional membership

- Awards

- [Disclaimer][5]

Two frequent *Restricted* components in the ASs are *Affiliation: general*, i.e. the University where the e-writer works (in 85.0% of the ASs), and *Affiliation: specific*, as represented by her/his department, degree course or institute (in 82.0% of the ASs). All the other *Restricted* components are infrequent.

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[5] The disclaimer is found in only one AS. We cannot tell if it is a component that the e-writer chose to write or whether it was appended to her/his message by her/his institution. Therefore, we enclosed it in square brackets.

Mentions of (forthcoming) *Publications* and current or upcoming *Projects* (including conferences and workshops) apply to 11.0% and 8.5%, respectively, of the ASs (e.g. *Some recent projects: Amos Paran and Pauline Robinson (2016) Literature: Into the Classroom (OUP)*).

Slightly more frequent are the components *Institutional appointment*: *home institution* (in 25.0% of the ASs; e.g. *Rector's delegate for "Gender equality"*) and *Institutional appointment: external* (in 16.5% of the ASs; e.g. *British Council Consultant*).

Finally, there are three more infrequent components: mention of *Other professional membership* (5.0%; e.g. *Honorary Fellow of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies*), *Awards* (1.5%; e.g. *Fulbright Alumnus*) and a *Disclaimer* (1.5%), partly reproduced below:

> La información contenida en este correo es CONFIDENCIAL, de uso exclusivo del destinatario/a arriba mencionado. […]
> Antes de imprimir este correo piense si es necesario: el medio ambiente es cosa de todos. […]

The findings show that the amount of information in the ASs is quite varied: the ASs include from 1 to 13 components (see Table 6), the average value being 6.66 (st.dev. 2.08). However, a majority of the ASs (62.0%) comprise between 5 and 7 components, while an even larger majority (e.g. 88.5%) include 3 to 9 components, which suggests a preference for complexity and elaboration, although not exploiting the full possibilities. The ASs with very few (i.e. 1 or 2) or very many components (i.e. 11, 12 or 13) are infrequent.

Table 6: Number and dispersion of the AS components.

Number of components per AS	Number of ASs	Percentage
One	1	0.5
Two	1	0.5

Three	9	4.5
Four	10	5.0
Five	37	18.5
Six	48	24.0
Seven	39	19.5
Eight	16	8.0
Nine	18	9.0
Ten	12	6.0
Eleven	5	2.5
Twelve	2	1.0
Thirteen	2	1.0
Global	200	100

Variation is determined by the *number* and *types* of components instantiated in the ASs, some of which belong to the *Common* set, while others to the *Restricted* one. However, both the *Common* and the *Restricted* components focus on aspects of the e-writers' scholarly identity, thus having an identificatory function.

Finally, the dispersion values of each AS component, and the fact that none is instantiated in all the ASs considered, means that ASs do not include core (i.e. compulsory) components whose sequencing can be precisely specified. However, preferred sequencing patterns *are* detectable, when examining where individual components occur with respect to their neighbouring ones. The sequencing hierarchy is this: *Title > Name > Academic status > Disciplinary field > Affiliation ~ Publications ~ Projects > Contact details ~ Publications ~ Projects > Link*.

This suggests that first scholars tend to specify their identity, then their membership and finally their achievements, together with indications on how they can be reached.

5. Discussion

Over half of ASs (66.3%) are written in one language, ELF being attested in 4.5% of cases. Bilingual ASs have one more prominent and one less prominent language.

The ASs examined may include several components (cf. Rains and Young 2006), and although none is found in all the ASs and their dispersion values vary, they combine in typical clusters. Once the writer's personal identity is revealed, her/his academic positioning is established; this may then be followed by practical considerations, and, occasionally, by optional glimpses into her/his private life.

Particularly noticeable among the components are *Name and surname*, *Affiliation: general*, *Affiliation: specific*, *Contact details* and *Academic status*, followed by the slightly less frequent *Title* and *Disciplinary field*. Among the least widely dispersed components are those that highlight the sender's professional value (e.g. *Publications*, *Projects*), or which offer a glimpse of the writer's personal identity, namely *Link: personal websites*, *Housekeeping* and *Viewpoints*. This suggests that the ASs have a strong identificatory function, being focused on the e-writer's identity, position, and addresses and affiliations (cf. Rains and Young 2006).

The components of the ASs overlap with the information units (moves) of academic homepages (Hyland 2011a). They also bear strong resemblances to the moves identified in bionotes (Hyland and Tse 2012). This suggests that the ASs highlight academic over private identity, drawing attention to the writers' professional accomplishments, and are occasionally exploited as "bulletin boards" with housekeeping notices and as "showcases" for self-expression with miscellaneous text.

The comments we received from some e-writers revealed a multi-faceted picture of the rationale of AS writing. Apparently, ASs may serve to: give essential information about one's academic identity; provide easy access to detailed information about the e-

writer; function as a CV or business card; provide contact information; dispel doubts about the e-writer's identity, especially for the administration or colleagues from other universities.

Our respondents also observed that ASs may be used only with certain addressees, especially in official messages, and that an end-of-message quotation or proverb is meant to be uplifting. Some specified that the content and language of their ASs takes into account their target readership, while others pointed out that detailed information about one's accomplishments may signal insecurity or self-glorification. Finally, others stated that their ASs may have to conform to a template provided by the administration, or that they are drafted after examining others'. This suggests that scholars may consider their ASs a non-trivial manifestation of their academic identity.

6. Conclusion

The AS is a discursive site where writers exchange information and 'socialise' (Sherblom 1988), by representing themselves. ASs build scholars' professional identity (Rains and Young 2006), and promote their personal brand (cf. Radford et al. 2018), highlighting how they want to be perceived by others (cf. Hyland 2011a), in an institutional context, where peers' approval is at stake (cf. Hyland and Tse 2012).

The ASs in our corpus encode referential-informational focused on the e-writers' public-professional identity, and less on their personal-private sphere. This is probably under the covert and/or internalised control of the institution within which emails are sent out. ASs function as discursive events of self-categorisation and self-identification which reflect in-group roles (Moksness and Olsen 2019). At the same time, some ASs are developing as sites for ratifying one's professional reputation (Radford et al. 2018). This emerges when they undergo revisions, reporting the writers' recent accomplishments, and signals that the e-writers' awareness of reputation-building

changes in their identity – a construct in a state of flux – calls for changes in its representation.

ASs qualify as genres, since they are typified communicative actions that meet recurrent social-interactional needs (Bazerman 1988), and which may be bent to suit secondary communicative goals (cf. Bhatia 1993). They share traits with other academic genres."From the point of view of content, ASs are like virtual business cards (Rains and Young 2006), bionotes (Hyland and Tse 2012) and homepages (Hyland 2011a), providing identifying, contact, and possibly promotional information, and also like CVs, indicating what a person has done and is able to do (cf. Blanchet 2016). In terms of function, ASs are similar to bionotes, serving as assertions of "self-representation in scholarly life" (Hyland and Tse 2012, 155). As for their context of production and reception, ASs are similar to homepages, revealing a struggle "between institutional and personal control" (Hess 2002, 172), as the identities of academics are constructed while considering the needs, goals and ideology of the university (Thoms and Thelwall 2005; Hyland 2011a). Thus, ASs conform to the provision of a professional more than personal representation of their e-writers, that is, as members of their universities rather than individuals: being aligned with practices of the group that academics claim membership in, only occasionally do they let their personalities emerge (Rains and Young 2006).

This study suffers from two main limitations. First, we analysed a small amount of data, when considering that 300 billion email messages are exchanged every day (Campaign Monitor 2019). Second, the nature of the data is skewed, because most of the ASs examined are by scholars in the humanities, so that cross-disciplinary comparisons were not possible. However it complements previous studies in that it examines ASs by scholars. Its results are in keeping with Rains and Young (2006) on

ASs in educational institutions, and with Hyland (2011b) and Hyland and Tse (2012) on bionotes.

Future research could determine the frequency of occurrence of ASs in email messages both in general and across social variables, explore the correlations between features of ASs and variables like gender and status, investigate similarities and differences in AS writing practices across cultures, contrast scholars' ASs with their bionotes, and examine the impact of ASs on receivers' perceptions of e-writers. This will lead to a deeper understanding and description of the genre.

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