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Research Paper

I regret to inform you: Reason and Empathy in Journal Rejection Emails

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Abstract

About 30 out of 100 authors submitting to top-ranked journals celebrate the acceptance of their work while a significant majority routinely deal with the rejection of their research, according to Elsevier (2024). Situated in this asymmetry, this sociolinguistic study examines the reasons for the rejection of works submitted to research journals and the language in which this negative news is couched by editors of 'high impact' journals. Focusing on 21 negative decision emails shared by Filipino English language scholars identified through snowballing technique, this qualitative study first, identifies the common causes given for the rejection of article submissions to journals indexed in Scopus or Web of Science using qualitative content analysis. Then, it examines the practice (or lack) of empathy in this form of communication using Clark et al.'s (2012) approach in identifying and coding segments of empathic communication. The analysis reveals that rejections are linked to issues of substance (poor fit, methodological vagueness, insufficient contribution), form (non-compliance with submission guidelines), or both (high similarity score). It also shows that all 21 decline decisions are couched with some compassion, albeit variably expressing attentive, affective, and cognitive empathy. These findings can contribute practical guidance especially for novice researchers from the Global South, who are struggling to get their work legitimized by elite journals. At the same time, it can help promote empathy as an attribute to humanize the increasingly robotic race to 'publish or perish.'

Keywords: Sociolinguistics; Language of Rejection; Empathic Communication; High Impact Journals; Scopus, Web of Science, Early Career Researchers; Humanizing Academia.

1. Introduction

The increasing pressure for higher education institutions (HEIs) to join the ranks of globally accredited universities and for early career researchers (ECRs) to progress in their academic career trajectory sharpens the necessity to publish in journals that are considered 'high impact.' However, this goal to publish (lest the institutional and personal promotion dreams perish) is not necessarily easy to achieve. Top-tier journals set stringent screening criteria, the peer review process could test the waiting authors' patience, and reviewers' feedback can be overwhelming, if not downright discouraging. Only about 30 out of 100 authors submitting to top-ranked journals celebrate the acceptance of their work while a significant majority routinely deal with the rejection of their research, according to Elsevier (2024). The challenge can be doubly intimidating for ECRs, who are relatively new members in the academic publishing community. On top of this challenge, teaching assignments, community involvement, and personal life compete for the academics' attention and priority. This complex situation presents an important opportunity to support ECRs, particularly from the Global South, which represents epistemology that is relatively under-represented in top tier global scholarship in comparison with knowledge contribution from the Global North. This asymmetry is further discussed in the literature review.

As global patterns indicate, knowledge contribution and publication have been largely dominated by scholars representing scholarship from the Global North context. The research divide is clearly evident in the volume of studies published in top tier journals. In 2018, statistics show that, excluding India and China, the Global North produced about 35,000 scientific articles per country. Meanwhile, an equivalent of only 11% of that production was credited to Global South countries. Of the approximately 4,000 journal articles per country from the Global South, less than 2% were

recognized as among the top 1% globally, most cited articles. This glaring disparity has been attributed to factors such as comparably lower investment, differential English proficiency, a smaller cohort of researchers, and biases against Southern researchers' work, which have a higher chance of being rejected by elite journals (Albanna, 2022). The odds of work rejection against novice researchers (also known as 'emerging academics') are especially higher compounding their insecurity about their ability to meet the stringent standards of peer reviewers and to manage their self-doubt and impostor syndrome that grow with every rejection (Doran, 2024; Miller et al., 2011).

Probing the struggle of Global South researchers to publish in Global North journals, which dominate the international academic landscape, Naidu et al. (2024) discovered the 'shapeshifting' strategy of some Global South scholars in playing the publishing game. In order to negotiate the value of their knowledge contribution, Global South authors strive to attend to both local and global imperatives of scholarship. By "stand[ing] astride the borders of two worlds without belonging fully to either" (p. 1), their work gains more chances of acceptance in global scholarship.

On one hand, this study acknowledges the diversity within the Global South population of scholars, which includes a number of emerging recognized experts whose work impacts global policy (Kinthaert, 2023) and manage to penetrate top-tier, Global North-affiliated journals. On the other hand, this research is more concerned about the majority of scholars, especially novice members, who are struggling to meet the evolving demands of research publication. Novice and more experienced members of academia tend to have differential approaches in navigating the expectations of the profession. For example, Daneshkhah and Shooshtari (2023) noted that more experienced English teachers were more attitudinally and cognitively invested in online professional development than their novice counterparts, who demonstrated a more superficial, behavioral orientation. Such variation is likely to be evident as well in teachers' orientation toward the research component of their work in academia.

Situated in these tensions between Global North and Global South, expert and novice researchers' experiences in academic publishing, the present study seeks to offer some discipline-specific understanding of why research articles related to English language studies are denied by journal reviewers and how editors communicate these reasons to the authors. Specifically, the research answers two questions: What are the common reasons of Scopus-indexed journals for rejecting research articles authored by Filipino language scholars? How is empathic language applied (if at all) in delivering this negative news in the decision email?

The answers to this inquiry can benefit two cohorts in academia: Global South ECRs, particularly Filipinos specializing in English language studies, and editors of top tier journals. First, guided by recent knowledge of the dominant reasons for rejection in linguistics journals, Global South ECRs can be better guided and motivated to submit their articles to high-impact journals. Second, through an awareness of practices (or lack) of empathic communication in journal rejection letters, journal editors can be challenged to exercise more interpersonal sensitivity in the way they convey bad news to hopeful authors. These expected benefits could in turn translate to the broader benefit of promoting a more supportive culture among researchers in English language education, dedicated to growing, digitized human knowledge alongside mindful care for the human researcher. This aligns with the argument of Victorovich et al. (2023) for prioritizing humanistic and humanitarian values in the context of English language education digitalization. After all, we are not robots. It takes more for us to recharge when we are fully drained from the demands of academic life.

Toward this goal, the next section situates the present study in existing literature on empathic communication, particularly in academic and journal publishing contexts, and its intersections with prevailing mindsets in the global academic publishing regime. This is followed by a discussion of the content analysis approach and major findings from the collected journal rejection emails. The conclusion highlights implications for Filipino ECRs in English language studies, journal editors, and future research.

2. Literature Review: Studies on Empathy in Academia and Rejection Letters

The researcher in the present study is primarily interested in empathy. Although more commonly associated with psychology (Wondra & Ellsworth, 2015), the concept of empathy is an equally important concept in sociology (McCaffree, 2020). Tracing its etymology in the German term 'Einfühlung' (rooted in the Greek word 'empatheia', meaning 'to enter feelings from the outside'), Howe (2013) defined empathy as the ability to "see and feel the world from the other's point of view, attempt to understand it, and seek to convey that understanding as we relate with those around us" (p.24).

Studies on empathy in academia appear to be more focused on teacher-student interactions and tend to focus on the allied concept of politeness. For example, Zarei and Mohammadi (2012) examined how postgraduate students expressed politeness in their email requests to their professors. A strategy employed by students that can potentially engender an empathic response from their teachers is providing a clear reason, justification, or explanation for their action.

More closely aligned with the topic of this paper, however, Thaler (2023) actively argued for teachers to develop digital empathizing skills particularly in foreign language classes, where students may feel heightened insecurity, thus, needing more care and understanding from their teachers. Thaler's (2023) pedagogical recommendation specifically focuses on the communicative component of empathy, which appears to be less studied. This claim is anchored on Howe's (2013) definition of empathy, which comprises three components: (1) emotional (affective reaction to the emotions of another), (2) cognitive (adopting another's perspective), and—the least focused one in research (3) communicative (using various media to express emotional and cognitive empathy to another).

Much less attention (if at all) has been dedicated to exploring empathy in author-editor interactions, particularly in the context of research publishing. However, this specific interaction in academia presents an important site for the practice of empathy, especially where it involves early-career academics, who represent the future cohort of scholars who will sustain the global production and communication of (hopefully) socially relevant, good quality knowledge.

On the subject of research publication, several articles have examined the reasons articles get rejected and have enumerated ways to increase the chances of acceptance (e.g., Dreyfuss & Ryan, 2018; Haski-Leventhal, 2021; Hawkes et al., 2021; Khadilkar, 2018; Meurer et al., 2024; Watson, 2019). Generally, these articles echo the same ideas, which Meurer et al. (2024) succinctly summarized into "three major types of expectations: (1) contribution-related, (2) novelty related, and (3) language expectations" (p. 5). Contribution-related expectations refer to the article's potential to contribute theoretically (theory building or theory testing), empirically (evidence-based study adding new knowledge), or socially (benefit to a specific social cohort). Novelty-related expectations refer to the distinctiveness (or newness, unusualness) of reported findings. Language expectations refer to adherence to academic writing style, as well as the specific guidelines of the target journal as regards citation, article structure, and English grammar and style (Dreyfuss & Ryan, 2018; Hawkes et al., 2021).

Instead of identifying what the article should have, another approach to this discourse is identifying what the article should avoid. For instance, Khadilkar (2018) identified the top five reasons for the rejection of articles in the *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* of India as: "poor methodology, no new information, poor scientific content, reported cases not rare enough or of low priority, and similar papers existing in the literature" (p. 240).

Besides prescribing dos and don'ts, these articles, typically authored by editors of journals in the fields of medicine and business, also dispense advice about the proper attitude that authors should have toward the peer review process. Dreyfuss and Ryan (2018) admonish authors to be prepared to revise and resubmit, saying that "No matter how tired of your article you may have grown by this time, do not give up at the prospect of working on it some more" (p. 10). This reminder to be patient is also mentioned by Haski-Leventhal (2021), who further appeals to authors' empathy for reviewers who are not easy to find and who may not be able to finish their reviews promptly especially during difficult times like the COVID-19 pandemic. She further exhorts authors to be more appreciative of reviewers' feedback, "approach it with the gratitude it deserves, as anonymous academics volunteer to help an author they do not know for no credit" (p. 494). Yeo et al. (2022) also remind authors that "most peer reviewers [despite being] busy academics themselves with heavy teaching and research obligations… volunteer their time and services as peer reviewers without receiving any payment or even recognition" (p. 272).

This appeal for empathy is, in turn, also made to journal editors who routinely dispense negative letters to hopeful authors. Limaye (1988) studied the use of indirect approach by editors in delivering negative news to authors, which may be either a direct rejection of their submission or a call to revise the paper. Using quantitative approach, he pooled a corpus of editors' letters to authors and surveyed the authors' reaction to the tone of the letter (whether it reflected empathy), the authors' reaction to the sender (whether the editor showed expertise), and the letter's impact on their affect (or feeling about themselves) as authors. He used two indices to qualify empathy (caring-uncaring, sincere-insincere, understanding-indifferent) and expertise (knowledgeable-unknowledgeable, experienced-inexperienced, perceptive-non-perceptive). The main finding recommends that editors provide authors with alternative courses of action (e.g., directing

them to other journals) to show that they gave careful thought to the decision and are interested in helping the authors succeed in their publication goal.

Over a decade later, Limaye (2001) revisited negative letters and proposed two conceptual frameworks in evaluating the merit of explaining a reject decision. The first framework is opportunity cost (based on economic theory), which prescribes that "the opportunity cost incurred by targets of bad news should be offset by senders with an offer to provide explanation" (p. 100). The second framework is attribution (based on marketing theory), which suggests that providing a reason for the reject decision will be beneficial to the senders because "in the absence of the reasons, the rejectees will attribute motives and create reasons, thus depriving the senders of their control over the explanation portion of the messages" (p. 100).

Examining academic job refusal letters, Thominet (2020) used genre analysis to explore their content, applicants' reactions to it, and any correlation between the two. While he found that the letters contained conventional moves, such as appreciation, job-refusal, and goodwill, some included declaration and explanation moves. Yet less common was the personalization of the content, which however was found to make a significant positive difference in the reception of the denied applicants. He found that "applicants connect the perception of being valued to statements that speak to them as an individual" (p. 30). This extra sensitivity and effort to show rapport can be achieved in only a few words or a sentence, which he recommended as also possibly relevant for application in journal article rejections. This personalized touch of empathy could be especially meaningful to early-career academics, typically needing more encouragement to persist in the dog-eat-dog world of scholarly publication.

Similarly, the study of Eveleth and Eveleth (2021) examining rejection letters to job applicants emphasized the need for more interpersonal sensitivity, including the provision of a clear and carefully worded explanation, in the construction of this negative message. The use of automated applicant tracking systems for efficiency tends to hide or render invisible the impact of such negative letters to the applicants with potentially meaningful consequences to the organization and the recruiter. They predict that "some communication through these systems will likely decrease the size and quality of subsequent applicant pools" (p. 11).

In the case of academic journals, little thought for interpersonal sensitivity in the language of rejection letters could potentially affect the cohort of authors submitting their articles. This concern brings to the fore the human side of scholarship, which appears to be in danger of being overtaken by the neoliberally motivated race to get published in top-tier journals. The publish-or-perish culture has been problematized in studies that examined its effect on academics. For example, examining the perception of tenured and tenure-track management faculty in a US-based business school immersed in the publish-or-perish culture, Miller et al. (2011) found three negative experiences and views linked to this mindset: (1) publication stress or burn-out, (2) discouragement from engaging in creative, non-traditional research, and (3) perceived conflict between teaching and research and the attendant tendency to marginalize teaching with the prioritizing of research.

Besides acknowledging its negative impact on the human academics, other studies have also challenged the discourse, proposing a reimagining from "publish or perish" to "publish and flourish" (Yeo et al., 2022) and "publish for purpose" (Elbanna & Child, 2023). The former proposes repackaging the academic publication regime to be less intimidating for early-career academics, who should be encouraged with "positivity and optimism" (Yeo et al., 2022, p. 274). However, it still subscribes to the idea that academic publication is a game. To win, new players need to learn the rules, play by the rules, and persevere in order to succeed. This gamification of academic publishing is problematic as it tends to blur or erase the humanistic purpose of the scholarly endeavor (Piller, 2021; Tenedero, 2024). This priority for purposeful publishing is also the core argument of Elbanna and Child (2023), who warned against the negative effects of obsessing over mass production of journal articles, including the spread of unethical practices (e.g., predatory journals) and the proliferation of poor-quality papers on trivial issues, such as those that simply rediscover or relabel already-known concepts. Their final call is to revisit the essential question: "What is the purpose of scholarly endeavor?" (p. 617). This question, I believe, should be the constant contemplation of every researcher especially in moments of self-doubt ignited by repeated rejections from journals, as well as in moments of self-approbation with every acceptance email received and soon shared on social media.

Overall, the reviewed related literature reflects some marked differences in Global North and Global South epistemologies on the subject of academic publishing and empathy. First, academic publishing advisories were mostly

from editors affiliated with education institutions in the Global North like the US, the UK, and Australia, with the exception of an article authored by a Global South editor. This pattern reflects the authority of Global North scholarship as experts in what qualifies as publication-worthy knowledge for global dissemination and readership. Second, the Global North literature on empathy appears to feature in balance theoretical development and practical application. Meanwhile, Global South studies (at least those mentioned in this article) appear more focused on exploring pragmatic solutions to real-life problems, such as communication challenges of graduate students and offshore accountants, who differentially hold positions of less power in globalized interactions. Last, the call to revive the sense of purpose for publication is echoed more persistently by Global South voices. They generally take up a critical stance toward the robotic race to publish and propose more positive and humane ways of framing the academic publishing regime, which, if left unchecked, could lose its meaning to mere metrics. Collectively, these patterns present an important opportunity for this study to make a novel contribution toward decolonizing academic publishing. Building on the case for humane research, this study explores empathy in journal rejection letters in the field of English language research grounded on the experience of early career researchers from the Philippines, as a representative case from the Global South.

3. Methodology: Data Collection, Analysis, and Positionality

The data for this study comprise a collection of anonymized rejection letters received by early-career researchers teaching English language courses in the Philippine's higher education institutions. In determining early-career researchers, I expanded the definition of ECRs to include those within 10 years post-PhD conferral. These inclusion criteria were specified in the call for participation, which was publicized in my personal social media account and circulated on the Facebook page of the Linguistic Society of the Philippines. These public postings collectively received 84 reactions, 15 shares, 5 comments, and an email – unanimously expressing interest in the topic and the findings. Yet, despite the positive reception that these responses indicated, they did not yield any concrete participation. Realizing that the data I am asking to be shared with me, albeit in anonymized form, is potentially face-threatening to whomever would volunteer to participate, I resorted to a more personal approach to data gathering. Starting with my personal contacts of fellow Filipino ECRs in English language studies, I employed a snowballing technique. Scholars who shared one or two rejection emails were asked to refer other colleagues who fit the ECR criteria. These referrals were subsequently contacted through private messaging on Facebook or via email, detailing what the study aims, how they can help, and how their identity will be protected. Data protection was done by masking each email, that is, by blackening the name of the author, editor, and journal in the rejection email. The total data set comprised of 21 rejection emails (de-identified as R01 to R21). The sufficiency of this sample size was determined when qualitative data saturation was reached, that is, when novel themes no longer emerged from the dataset. Table 1 shows the profile of the journals that sent the rejection emails analyzed in this study.

Table 1. *Profile of Journals Represented in the Rejection Email Data*

Profile	Description (N = 20*)
Indexing	Scopus – 19 Web of Science – 1
Quartile	Q1 – 15 Q2 – 2 Q3 – 2 Q4 – 1
Discipline	Education – 7 Linguistics and Language – 3 Communication – 2 Other social sciences (e.g., religious studies, urban studies, psychology) – 8

*Only 20 journals are represented in the dataset because 2 rejection emails were from the same journal.

The first question, which focused on the reasons for the rejection of journal submissions by Filipino language ECRs, was answered through qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Specifically, conventional content analysis was used, as is typical for studies that aim to describe a phenomenon. The reason for the rejection of submissions to academic journals was determined by the researcher by reading each email word for word and highlighting segments

from the text that explain why the article was declined by the editor. The segments, which were a sentence, or a short paragraph following the statement of the decision to not publish the work, were tabulated and later grouped and coded during the analysis. Finally, the identified segments were categorized based on their negative assessment of the substance and/or the form of the rejected article.

To answer the second question focused on the use of empathic language in the negative message, I adapted Clark et al.'s (2012) approach in identifying and coding segments of empathic communication. While originally created to assess empathetic communication in contact center customer service calls, Clark et al.'s (2012) typology of empathy (i.e., attentive, affective, and cognitive) served as a starting point to examine the empathic communication practices in the written discourse of journal rejection emails.

In doing this, the researcher read each masked rejection email copied and pasted onto a Word document. Sentences in the email that expressed appreciation for the author's contribution (e.g., acknowledged the author's intention, elaborated on their ideas, summarized the article) were marked as segments of 'attentive empathy.' Sentences that identified with the author's feelings (e.g., expressing understanding of the author's reaction to the negative decision, offering an apology, referring to the experience of other authors) were marked as instances of 'affective empathy.' Finally, sentences that offered help (e.g., provided explanation for the outcome, proposing alternative options, stating what other authors have done) are marked as evidence of 'cognitive empathy.'

While adopting this framework, I was mindful of my positionality as both an ECR and an editor of a research journal in English language studies, albeit still in process for possible inclusion in Scopus. As such, the analysis that follows is organically informed by my personal experiences as both author and journal editor. The reliability of this interpretation was ascertained through collaborative coding with another researcher, whose training is focused on sociology, thereby representing a perspective outside yet allied to the linguistics discipline, which the author represents. The intercoding process began with the coders' familiarization with the dataset and the coding frame developed by the researcher, followed by independent coding sessions, and lastly, the comparison of codes and finalization of interpretation, which is discussed next.

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, I discuss in turn two things. First, I present the reasons the research articles of ECRs in English language studies have been rejected by top journals and offer recommendations to potentially satisfy each criterion. Second, I characterize the language of empathy used by the journal editors to convey the negative news and highlight dominant patterns in the written discourse, which could serve as a template or invite innovation to send a more personalized message.

4.1. Reasons for Rejection

When research articles are returned with a decline decision, the emails are generically referred to "reviewers' feedback" and then proceeded to identify more specific justifications for the negative evaluation. These are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. *Reasons for Article Rejection*

Rejection Reasons	Sample Expressions
Poor Fit	In light of the appropriateness of your manuscript to our journal, your manuscript has been denied publication in the [Journal]. (R14)
	…your manuscript does not reach the required quality standard of this journal or fit within its scope, and we must therefore reject it. (R05)
	I regret to inform you that we do not consider this work to be of sufficient interest to our readership to warrant publication. (R08)
Methodological Vagueness	…from a methods perspective, it would be beneficial if your sampling decisions, your interview and observational data, and your analytic techniques were described in more detail…. (R06)
	You include nothing about the reliability of the study. Your interview questions and interview type is [sic] missing. …the research design is limited. …There is

	very limited information about the coding and analysis process carried out in the method section. …How validity and reliability was [sic] ensured? Detailed information was not provided. (R19)
Insufficient Contribution	While this piece is relatively well written, it does not advance the field in a meaningful way…. (R04)
	Honestly, I don't think the findings of the study will have a practical contribution to the field. (R19)
Non-Compliance with Submission Suidelines	Your paper has not been prepared in accordance with the instructions to authors submitting to [Journal]. (R09)
	…it is way over the word limit for the special issue. (R12)
	Author did not resubmit by the given deadline…even though we have extended the deadline by 10 days. (R10)
High Similarity Score	Our decision is to decline the submission. The similarity percentage exceeds 20% compared to other sources. (R15)
Limited Space	Because we receive many more manuscripts than we could possibly publish in [Journal], we are forced to reject manuscripts that do not strongly contribute to the methodology and utilization of [topic]. (R09)

The reasons for rejection differentially problematize the manuscript's substance and form. Focusing on substance, the most common reason for rejection is the article's 'poor fit'. This usually means that the topic of the article is outside the scope of the journal's research agenda. It could also mean that the way the article is written is markedly different (in a negative way) from that of the articles previously published, which possess the 'required quality standard' of the journal. An immediate lesson that these assessments teach is the necessity of carefully reviewing the target journals' description and reading at least one article recently published in the journal before attempting a submission. This previewing practice could help the authors pre-screen the suitability of their work in the journal.

Other 'substance' reasons for rejection point out limitations in the method and the contribution of the study. Editors question either the appropriateness of the research design or the way this section is reported in the manuscript. For instance, sample size is pointed out as problematic with implications to the generalizability of the findings and the overall merit of the study's knowledge contribution (see Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1

> …one of the main criteria for publication in [Journal] is that the article make [sic] an important contribution to our current understanding and knowledge of [topic]. Unfortunately, we do not feel that the work reported in the manuscript you sent us fulfills this criterion, particularly given the limited generalizability based on the small population studied.

This example highlights the importance of methodological decisions. This includes deciding whether to use qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method approach; how many participants to recruit or how many samples of texts to analyze; what measures to take to ascertain validity or trustworthiness of the interpretation. The other half is communicating these decisions comprehensively and clearly in the manuscript.

What constitutes 'sufficient' contribution, however, appears nebulous. While the reject reason contends that the findings of the study did not 'meaningfully' advance the field or offer sufficiently 'practical' contributions, such judgment could be undefined, thus, appearing to be dependent on the editor's personal judgment. Albeit seemingly ambiguous, this criterion could be met by authors by making an explicit statement of the study's unique contribution in key parts of the paper, such as the abstract and the conclusion.

Yet where the substance is perceived to be sound, a journal could still give a reject decision solely on the basis of problematic form. Non-compliance with the journal's submission guidelines, including exceeding the word limit and tardy (re)submission, are noted as grounds for a 'no' decision. Although seemingly cosmetic, these reasons suggest that the journals are not very flexible and expect authors to be fully compliant with their rules about word limit, formatting, and deadlines. This feedback instructs authors to take seriously the imperatives in the journals' submission guidelines.

Another negative reason given sits between the substance and form nexus as it relates to the originality of the written work. Where the article is found to have a similarity score greater than 20%, the reviewer/editor could question the originality of the ideas presented in the paper, or the way the ideas are presented, or both. Whichever the case may be, elite journals follow certain rules about what constitutes original versus plagiarized work, determined largely by software-generated scores. While authors are in the best position to genuinely ascertain the originality of their work, authors could do their own software similarity checking prior to submission and make some final adjustments to meet the journal standard. Also, since it remains uncertain whether and which similarity checkers consider the use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) as a form of plagiarism (see Bannister, 2024), it may be prudent for authors to avoid using GenAI in finalizing their article. Authors could also check if the target journal has a policy outlining the permissible use of GenAI and work around the given guidelines, for example, by including an honest declaration of where and how they used GenAI in the article.

A final reason for rejection indicates that journals have restrictions in regard to the number of articles they can accept. Immediately, this reasoning could appear unreasonable considering that unlimited space is one of the affordances of publishing journals in online form. Following this logic, an argument is made that the 'no space' justification is a proxy for 'poor fit' or 'lack of novel contribution,' possibly a euphemism for 'poor' substance (Edelmann, 2022). While this could be the case, it is equally possible that the declared restriction here is related not so much to the publication space as to the journal's manpower tasked to process all the submissions following a rigorous peer review system. Manpower pressure is heightened for top journals that receive exceptionally more submissions like *The Review of Higher Education* (Q1 Scopus), which had to stop accepting new submissions to allow the editorial team to catch up with over two years' worth of backlog in articles still pending review. This very telling example was cited by Altbach and de Wit (2018) in their compelling critique of the needlessly superfluous amount of research being published across the globe spurred by the unrealistic pressure on higher education institutions worldwide to comply with the overly research-focused matrix for the world ranking of universities. While this still ongoing phenomenon has many ill-effects (Elbanna & Child, 2023), one that is often invisible to authors is the tedious work of editorial staff and peer reviewers. Becoming acquainted with the entire cycle of article processing may help authors to appreciate the extent of scholarly and administrative work (often thankless) that goes into managing each submission.

Overall, rejections could stem from issues of substance (poor fit, methodological vagueness, insufficient contribution), form (non-compliance with submission guidelines), or both (high similarity score). Interestingly, the negative outcome could also be linked to factors beyond the merit of the submitted article, such as limited editorial staff. Indeed, there are things authors can do to improve their article's chance of acceptance. In fact, many of the recommendations I provide in this section are already discussed in other studies (e.g., Haski-Leventhal, 2021; Khadilkar, 2018). However, there are also things at work beyond the author's control, making the publication attempt a gamble, a precarious position, especially for novice scholars, who are relatively new to the game but subject to the same standards of promotion as their more experienced counterparts. Situated in this anxious reality, the discussion now turns to the language used by journals to convey the negative decision.

4.2. Breaking the News Gently

To examine the use of empathy in conveying the reject decision to ECRs, I adopted the framework of Clark et al. (2012). Table 3 shows examples of empathy, or statements that signal an effort to build relationship (Clark et al., 2012), found in *the rejection emails from top journals in English linguistics.*

Table 3. *Empathy in Rejection*

Type of Empathy	Definition	Sample Expressions
Attentive	Reading attentively and appreciatively the author's work	Thank you for submitting your manuscript, "[Title]" to [Journal]. (R08) Thank you for giving us the opportunity to consider your work. (R07) We read your abstract with great interest, and very much appreciate your thoughtful approach. (R13) I like that you have uncovered an interesting context in which to study the [topic]. (R06)

Affective	Identifying with the author's feelings	I apologize for the length of time it has taken to screen your manuscript, and I hope you and your family are well in these uncertain times. I am sorry to bring what is likely disappointing news about your submission. (R05) As an author myself, I am truly sorry to report this editorial decision because I know that it will be disappointing to you. (R06) I hope the outcome of this specific submission will not discourage you from the submission of future manuscripts. (R04)
Cognitive	Assuming the author's perspective to provide help	…there is a benefit in receiving fast feedback and being able to start revising the paper for another journal without delay. Please let me explain my decision and highlight some recommendations that may help to strengthen your paper. (R06) To assist you with taking your manuscript forward, my comments, and any reviewer comments, detailing the reasons for this decision, are below. (R17) I hope you are successful in finding an alternative publication for your work. For alternative journals that may be suitable for your manuscript, please refer to our Journal Finder. (R05) Although we are unable to include your work for this special issue, we very much hope that there will be future opportunities to work with you. (R14)

The typology presented above illustrates the different ways that editors cushion the bad news. Indeed, Clark et al.'s (2012) framework provided a good starting point for the analysis and appreciation of empathy in this written discourse. However, since their framework was originally intended for a different genre (i.e., customer service calls), some distinct findings are anticipated in the case of journal rejection emails. This includes the use of stock expressions, feeling words, and personal pronouns, which I now discuss in turn.

In attending to the emotions of authors, rejection emails used stock expressions that conveyed different forms of empathy. Attentive empathy was typically worded as: "Thank you for submitting your manuscript to [Journal]." Affective empathy was commonly couched as: "I hope the outcome of this specific submission will not discourage you from the submission of future manuscripts." Cognitive empathy, on the other hand, had more varied content as this included the specific reasons for the decline decision. However, the explanations were customarily followed by a suggestion to find other journals: "For alternative journals that may be suitable for your manuscript, please refer to our Journal Finder."

The use of stock expressions is pragmatic, especially for journals that have to manage a large number of submissions. However, the templated responses of negative news have been criticized as lacking personal touch to express more genuine empathy (Eveleth & Eveleth, 2021; Thominet, 2020). One way to address the limitation of automated messages is by adding statements tailored to the specific submission or the known situation of the author. This customization is exemplified by the first two sample statements of affective empathy (R05 and R06) in Table 2.

Another way that the journal rejections reflected empathy is through the use of feeling words that describe the editor's emotional state and depict the review process as an affective, not only a cognitive, encounter. Editors "appreciate" authors for submitting their manuscript; "like" what the authors did in the study; "regret," "apologize" and are "sorry" for bringing "disappointing" news because they "feel" or "believe" the work is, "unfortunately," not appropriate for the journal; and they very much "hope" the authors consider submitting to the journal again in the future. As a receiver of these emotion-laden statements, I find that these forms of emotive communication (Garaeva et al., 2023) have a soothing effect, somehow reducing the negative impact of the rejection and enabling me to imagine an actual person taking time to read and consider my work.

Also contributing to this imagining of a human, rather than a mere machine, behind the rejection email is the use of personal pronouns. These lexical choices are shown in Table 2, particularly the use of "I / me / my" to refer to the editor; "you / your" to refer to the author; and "we / our" to refer to the editorial team.

Overall, the good news is that the negative news is empathically couched by journals. As the data shows, editors deliver the decline decision while simultaneously expressing empathy (attentive, affective, cognitive). Empathic communication is done by using stock expressions to indicate appreciation for the contribution, validation of the author's disappointment, and expressed desire for the author's eventual success in getting the work published. While seemingly routine language, the compassion contained in these messages is highlighted through the use of feeling words and personal pronouns. These linguistic strategies are specially valuable in digital, written communication, where the disembodied channel tends to heighten mistrust and ambiguate statements. This is in line with the findings of Tenedero (2023) in her study of the communication challenges experienced by offshore Filipino accountants, who typically struggle with low trust in their highly digitized work.

5. Conclusion

Beyond identifying reasons for rejection and practices of empathy in the journal rejection email, this study tries to highlight the value of the human experience behind the research publication process. On the one hand, there are the journal editors and peer reviewers whose (volunteer) work is largely invisible to authors. On the other hand, there are the Filipino ECRs in English language studies, who anxiously deal with multiple rejections in their effort to publish in recognized journals. The critical point of contact between these two cohorts is the decision email, which is both a transactional and relational text. As this study has shown, journal rejection emails not only detail reasons for the formal decision but also demonstrate linguistic devices that engender an affective connection between the editor and the author. Because the sensitive news has high-stakes implication to the author, thoughtfully expressing it in more empathic language shows more humanity (speaking, too, from my own rejection experiences). That this practice was noted in all 21 rejection emails received by Filipino scholars in English language studies is encouraging. But whether this speaks to the experience of scholars representing other disciplines needs to be examined, as well as whether these expressions of empathy are, in fact, positively received by the authors. Hence, investigating the use of empathy in other fields of academic publishing and the impact of editors' empathic language could be meaningful ways of extending this research.

As this study has also seen, factors external to the article and beyond the author's control could influence the acceptance or rejection of the paper, such as the strain of the review process on the editorial team. To extend this, studies could investigate, for instance, anecdotal evidence hinting at the power of personal connections in academia as a kind of secret advantage in the publishing game. That friendship with the editor of a journal could possibly mean preferential treatment is an example of another latent reason for an accept or reject decision. This controversy may be somewhat related to the contentious practice of self-publishing by editors (Helgesson et al., 2022). Probing critical yet little explored realities like these could potentially reduce the research divide between Global North and Global South scholars. More in-depth qualitative investigation of the global research publishing phenomenon, the hidden ways in which it perpetuates social injustices and / or promotes compassion, as well as ways to address these issues, can contribute toward the important, big project of humanizing academia in this era of digital, global knowledge creation.

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Information on Informed Consent or any Data Privacy Statements

The data analyzed and presented in this study are anonymized and are obtained with the informed consent of the data providers.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Ethics Board Approval Statements

This study was exempted from ethics review by the University of the Immaculate Conception - Research Ethics Committee (Level 2, PHREB-accredited) on September 23, 2024.

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