Politeness in Professional E-Mails: A Content Analysis of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

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The world is teeming with more ways to communicate than ever before. Face-to-face and other traditional methods of interaction have been joined, and in many ways supplanted, by those conducted through technological conduits, such as computers, the Internet, and mobile devices.

From e-mail to instant messaging (IM) to list serves, computer-mediated communication (CMC) enables interactants to conduct business or personal affairs without physically seeing or hearing their counterpart. Such seemingly impersonal developments in human communication have spurred research into the ways politeness is or is not maintained during CMC interactions (Darics, 2010; Herring, 1994; Haugh, 2010).

This paper seeks to expand on this research by utilizing content analysis to examine 100 e-mails received by this author at his place of employment over the course of one month (July 20 to August 20, 2010) to determine the extent to which the tenets of Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson’s “politeness theory” exist in this mode of CMC. Additionally, an original hypothesis will be tested that posits more negative than positive politeness markers will be present in the e-mails due to sender’s efforts to mitigate the inherent intrusiveness of the medium, and that the main speech device used to achieve this negative politeness is hedging.

Politeness Theory: A Review

Formulated in 1978 and expanded in their 1987 book “Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage,” Brown and Levinson’s original “politeness theory” states human interaction is negotiated with two universal desires in mind: that to be appreciated and that to be free from intrusion (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Grounded in the dramaturgical theories on “face” put forth by Erving Goffman (Arundale, 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 2006; Darics, 2010; Locher, 2006; O’Driscoll, 2007; Stewart, 2008), politeness theory focuses on ways politeness is used as
“face work,” or how a person maintains his/her “face needs” (Littlejohn, 2008, p. 125) while accounting for the face needs of others.

**Positive and Negative Face**

Brown and Levinson separate these face needs into two categories: “positive face” and “negative face” (Wilson, Kim & Meischke, 1991/1992, p. 216). A person’s “positive face” is his/her desire to be appreciated and approved (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). One’s “negative face” is his/her desire to be free from imposition or intrusion (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Of course, infringing on these needs is often unavoidable. The theorists term such infringements as performing “face-threatening acts” (FTAs) (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 125).

**Positive and Negative Politeness**

To mitigate face threats to one’s positive or negative face, Brown and Levinson distinguished two politeness methods: “positive politeness” and “negative politeness.”

When a threat to one’s desire to be approved or liked (positive face) is unavoidable, utilizing “positive politeness” to soften the speech act helps alleviate some corresponding face-threat. For example, if a student wished to ask a professor to reconsider his/her grade, baldly saying “I would like you to reconsider my grade” carries a higher level of face-threat than if the same desire was conveyed with a hint of positive politeness: “I would appreciate it [emphasis added] if you could look at my grade again” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 126).

“Negative politeness” helps mitigate threats to one’s desire to be unimpeded or un-intruded upon (negative face). Prefacing a request for a favor with “I’m sorry to bother you…” is an example of utilizing negative politeness (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 125).

Scarcella and Brunak (1981) state: “Underlying negative politeness are strategies geared towards preventing infringement upon the hearer’s freedom of action. They are central to
differential behavior….” (p. 66-67). One speech device often used to limit this intrusion, and thus achieve negative politeness, is hedging.

**Hedges**

“Hedges” are pragmatic markers that attenuate the strength of an utterance, making it more polite than it would ordinarily seem (Allan, 1986). Reasons for employing hedges range from the desire to mitigate statements that would otherwise seem too forceful to showing politeness or respect to superiors (Ayodabo, 2007). Types of hedges include pseudoconditionals (if-clauses such as “if you like,” “if you want to”); but-clauses, which seek to provide an explanation of the speaker’s motives for carrying out an FTA; subjectivity markers (“I suppose,” “I wouldn’t say,” and “I don’t think”); downgraders (“just,” “just in case”); tentativizers (“kind of,” “sort of”); conventionalized expressions (“To tell you the truth,” “Nothing personal”); and pragmatic idioms (“perhaps,” “maybe”) (Ayodabo).

**Politeness in Office Emails**

It has been said that over time the exchange of social or personal information via computer-mediated communication can be just as potent as that exchanged face-to-face (Bunz & Campbell, 2004). This author would argue that messages conveyed through e-mails are actually more potent than those communicated face-to-face or over-the-phone. While words expressed verbally are captured and processed solely by the mind of the hearer, those typed into an e-mail remain perpetually retrievable for scrutiny. Therefore, it could be argued that crafting an e-mail requires more attention from an individual – especially in a professional setting – than conveying a verbal expression. As such, examining e-mails for politeness markers is a worthy exercise when seeking to learn the extent to which politeness theory applies to CMC.

**Method**
Both manifest and latent coding (Neuman, 2006) was used in the review of 100 e-mails this author received either directly, through a forward, or by carbon-copy (cc) from July 20 through August 20, 2010 in his capacity as a public relations and communications professional for a law-based non-profit organization in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At the time each e-mail was written, sent and received, neither the sender (S) nor the recipient (R) was aware a content analysis of his/her message would eventually be performed. For the purposes of this research, the sex was noted in an effort to determine whether politeness markers were used more frequently by males or females and the hierarchical relationship between S and R was also recorded to determine whether politeness was more present in e-mails to individuals of a higher professional ranking (each e-mail was designated as $S = R$, $S > R$, $S < R$ based on this author’s two years of institutional knowledge of inter- and outer-office relational dynamics).

Results

By chance, of the 100 e-mails, 50 were sent from females and 50 sent from males. $S = R$ e-mails constituted 41 of the 100; $S > R$ e-mails 32 of the 100; and $S < R$ e-mails 27 of the 100.

Utilizing Brown and Levinson’s theory and data on hedging, this author concluded of the 100 e-mails, 51 contained at least one instance of a negative or positive politeness markers. In total, 72 negative or positive politeness markers were used in the 100 e-mails, with instances of politeness ranging from four per e-mail (three e-mails), to two per e-mail (13 emails), to one per e-mail (57 emails). Male senders accounted for 25 of the 51 e-mails containing politeness markers, while females accounted for 26. Of the 72 total instances of politeness in the 100 e-mails, males accounted for 38, while females constituted 34. These results suggest sex plays no part in the use of politeness in e-mails.
In terms of relational hierarchy, 21 of the 51 e-mails containing at least one politeness marker constituted an \( S = R \) relationship, 20 an \( S < R \) relationship, and 10 a \( S > R \) relationship. Of the three e-mails containing four distinct politeness instances, two constituted an \( S = R \) relationship and one an \( S < R \) relationship. No e-mails sent by a superior had more than one politeness marker, and of the ten, positive politeness was employed in six (such as “Fantastic work” (e-mail #75), “I trust your judgment” (e-mail #88) and “Thanks for your excellent efforts” (e-mail #60)). These results support, however modestly, the notion that politeness is utilized more often in e-mails sent to a superior and that superiors are more concerned with validating a recipient’s positive face than mitigating threat to one’s negative face.

In support of the hypothesis stated in this paper’s introduction, just 11 instances of “positive politeness” were noted, of which only five were sent by individuals other than superiors. The remaining 61 politeness markers were of the negative variety only. Of these 61, 57 involved some form of a hedge (see Appendix for direct examples).

**Conclusion**

Politeness in communication as posited by Brown and Levinson is indeed alive and well in CMC, used equally by both sexes and indiscriminate to the sender/recipient relationship in the e-mail in question. Since e-mails are intrinsically an intrusion on one’s time, negative politeness is employed more often than positive politeness to mitigate face threats. Hedges are often used to accomplish this goal. Further research involving subjects separately and unknowingly conveying identical requests via e-mail, phone and in-person that are subsequently analyzed for differences in politeness phrasing might further illustrate the extent to which the tenets of Brown and Levinson’s theory is present in CMC.
References


doi:10.1515/IP.2007.024


APPENDIX

Pseudoconditionals: E-mail #1 (male, $S < R$) and E-mail #28 (male, $S = R$)

- #1: “If you are willing to participate,” “If you are able,” “If you agree,” and “At your next convenience”; #28: “If you get the chance.” Mitigate threats to negative face by implying recipient has the choice whether or not to acquiesce to request made in e-mail.

But-clause: Email #55 (male, $S < R$) and E-mail #66 (female, $S = R$)

- #55: “I was planning to call you today, but thought it would be less intrusive to send an e-mail first”; #66: “I left you a voicemail but thought I would try to reach you by e-mail”: Both e-mails explicitly admit the threat to negative face then utilize a but-cause to explain each sender’s motive.

Subjectivity markers: E-mail #96 (male, $S = R$) and E-mail #100 (female, $S = R$)

- #96: “I suppose it would be ok to…”; #100: “I must say…”: Phrases act to save sender’s positive face in the chance the assertion that completes the statement fails to occur.

Downgraders: E-mail #95 (female, $S > R$) and E-mail #67 (female, $S = R$)

- #95: “I just wanted to check in…”; #67: “I just got back to work yesterday so have yet to have a chance to…”

Other Politeness Markers of Note

- E-mail #53 (female, $S > R$): “Do you plan on sending an e-mail reminder?” [emphasis added]: Mitigates threat to negative face by making explicit request seem as if recipient has a choice whether or not to send follow-up e-mail.

- E-mail #9 (male, $S < R$): We never discussed, at least to my knowledge…” [emphasis added]: Saves positive face of sender in the chance the matter at hand was indeed discussed previously.