**A Pragmatic Analysis of Politeness in Emails**

**in the Workplace**

**by**

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**Politeness** in an interaction, according to Yule, is defined as the means employed to show awareness of another person’s **face**, the public self-image of a person. In other words, it is satisfying the face wants of other people. It also describes the extent to which somebody’s actions (and his words) match other’s perceptions of how they should be performed (Grundy, 1995) and can be accomplished in situations of social distance or closeness. The kind of politeness shown by a person who shows awareness of another person’s face (when that other appears socially distant) is “described to be of respect and deference, while politeness shown by a person to another person when that other is socially close is described in terms of friendliness, camaraderie, or solidarity“ (Yule, 1996). This paper holds the same view that politeness phenomena have been considered as “a means of characterizing the use of language to communicate” (Grundy, 1995).

Different cultures have different ways of showing politeness but everyone regards it as an acceptable behaviour. In India, politeness equals respect and hospitality; however, politeness as it is understood in the West is somewhat understood differently among Indians (Shah, 2005). In the Filipino home, politeness, especially towards the elderly is not only a social but a spiritual value. In the workplace, every member of the workforce –from the top administration down to the lowest rank- is expected to behave in a manner that avoids collision or “reduces friction” borrowing Lakoff’s terms in her definition which states that politeness is "a device used in order to reduce friction in personal interaction" (Lakoff (1979: 64 qtd. in Fraser, ). How people in the workplace show this is a concern to note; who shows “more or greater politeness” to whom seems predictable; but how these interlocutors exhibit politeness is interesting to study.

Reducing friction in interaction (especially when speaking) does not only mark a person’s proficiency in a language, but is also a “device” used in order to expedite operational processes in the workplace. In the Philippines, politeness is considered a Filipino value and being polite is an expected behaviour by people especially in the academe, and even in other places and culture. Politeness serves as a driver to move people in a harmonious working relationship and operation whether or not they are truly in good terms or not with one another. Yule says, “Much of what we say and a great deal of what we communicate is determined by our social relationships” (1996); hence, in the workplace, the operational procedures serve as legitimate reasons to make people communicate whether they maintain close or distant social relationship.

The writer of this paper became interested in what Austin says “what do people do with words” in the workplace- specifically in a tertiary, non-profit, Catholic, exclusive for girls higher academic institution. Her focus of inquiry is on politeness theory in action in the emails of people in this workplace as most of the communication being done in the school is through emails and phone calls unlike in other universities and colleges where routing slips and memos are being distributed or circulated in school by secretaries or messengers to communicate in the organization. In this school, only those papers that cannot be sent by the computer servers are being distributed or sent to offices personally. The use of emails is part of the school’s policy to lessen the use of paper in school operation – a measure to address the larger problem that besets the environment.

**Objectives of the Problem**

Politeness principles have broad descriptive power in terms of language use (Lakoff, 1972 qtd. in Grundy, 1995). They are major determinants of linguistic behaviour (Leech 1983) and they have universal status and linguistic manifestation (Brown and Levinson, 1978 qtd. in Grundy, 1995). The workplace is one context where politeness principles can be observed as polite utterances encode the relationship between the speaker and the receiver. The power-distance relationship among the interlocutors and the degree of imposition of one over another are reflected in the way they use words in their emails. How do people in the workplace (specifically in a Philippine higher education institution) use words to express politeness is the focus of this study.

This study hopes to answer the problem below:

**Main Problem:** What politeness strategies are employed by interlocutors in their emails?

This paper is more concerned on the pragmatic strategies used by the participants in their day-to-day emails and not exactly on specific content. It is on "what people do with words" according to Pragmatist Austin that is of most interest in the analysis and not just on what they "actually" say in print. 

The following are the sub-problems:

1. What specific politeness strategies were used by interlocutors in their emails :

1.1. by/from supervisors to their subordinates?

1.2. by/from  subordinates to their supervisors?

1.3. by/from interlocutors to their colleagues of similar rank/ position?

2. What is the structure/format of the emails used by each group?

3. What linguistic structures do the emails employ to effect specific functions or goals such as request, imposition, and apology?

The emails used in this study are those sent and received within the second semester of School-year 2011-2012.

The author of this paper sought permission from her colleagues and co-workers who occupy lower, same, and higher positions than her. Though she sent request emails to twenty target recipients, only fourteen positively responded to her emails asking them to become participants to this study. Some of them even requested that they be the ones to choose the emails they will be giving to the researcher to be included in this study and the others requested that specific emails that were sent to the writer of this paper for some purposes were the only ones to be allowed for use and not those which concern or include other people in the organization. Thus, purposive sampling was used in this study.

Six of these participants are considered subordinates (lower in rank than the writer); six are administrators which can therefore be considered equal in rank to this writer; two faculty members and one from the administrators are considered her peers or close friends. Though the writer of this paper and her emails are part of the conversations in the emails, she is not considered a major participant of this study.

**The Concept of Face**

Every time, people generally behave believing or expecting that other people will respect their public image, or their **face wants**. Thus, if another person says something that represents a threat to a person’s self-expectations of his/her self-image, it is referred to as a **face threatening act (FTA)**. Conversely, seeing or believing that an action can pose a threat to another person’s face, a speaker can lessen the possible threat which is called a **face saving act**. A person can consider the **positive face** **wants** or the **negative face wants** of another individual. The former refers to the need to be accepted, liked, be treated as a member of the same group, and know that other people share with his/her wants and the latter refers to a person’s need to be independent, to have freedom of action, and not to be imposed by another person. In order to avoid a face threatening act, a person may use a face saving act which employs **positive or negative politeness strategies.** A **positive politeness strategy** is one that appeals to a common goal, and even friendship while a **negative politeness strategy** allows the other person freedom to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’; hence, contains expressions which do not impose or at least use words that lessen the imposition (Yule, 1996). According to Brown and Levinson (1978 cited in Kitamura, 2000) negative politeness strategy can be shown in two ways: 1) by using a face saving act or saving the interlocutor’s ‘face’ (either ‘negative’ or ‘positive’) by lessening or softening face threatening acts (FTAs), such as advice-giving and disapproval; or 2) by satisfying ‘negative face’ by indicating respect for the addressee’s right not to be imposed on.

Fraser (1990) gave four major perspectives on the treatment of politeness: the social-norm view; the conversational-maxim view; the face saving view; and the conversational-contract view. All such views were also discussed by Thomas (1995) except the face-saving view which she integrated in the other perspectives as noteworthy in the discussion of politeness.

***The Social-norm View of Politeness***

How people understand politeness and how they embrace its concept and essence is what the social-norm view of politeness is all about. Every culture prescribes a particular set of norms “consisting of more or less explicit rules that prescribe a certain behavior, a state of affairs, or a way of thinking in a context” to be followed by the people who share the same culture. When a person’s action is in congruence with the norms, s/he is praised and made to feel accepted in a group; otherwise, s/he will be described to be rude or impolite (Fraser, 1990). In this view, politeness is historically associated with speech style; hence, a higher degree of politeness in speech implies greater politeness.

Fraser (1990) believes that the social-norm approach has few adherents among current researchers; he presents, however, three somewhat separate approaches to an account of politeness within the recent linguistic literature.

***The conversational-maxim view***

The conversational-maxim view is based heavily on the work of Grice (1967, published 1975 qtd. in Fraser, 1990) presented in his now-classic paper 'Logic and Conversation'. Grice believes that people engaged in a conversation are “rational individuals who are, all other things being equal, primarily interested in the efficient conveying of messages.” Though they may not be directly following what is expected of them to say, conversationalists know what they are talking about and they say what they say following their intention. Sometimes, a speaker “blatantly fails to observe a maxim, not intending to deceive or mislead, but to prompt the hearer to look for **a meaning which is different from, or in addition to, the expressed meaning**.” Grice’s theory is an attempt at explaining how a hearer gets from what is said to what is meant, from the level of expressed meaning to the level of **implied meaning** (Thomas, 1995). He proposed his general Cooperative Principle (CP) which provides that a person should:

"'Make a conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of talk exchange in which one is engaged." (1975:45)

Many pragmatists became interested in Grice’s CP in an effort to account for politeness; among them is Lakoff (1973) who was among the first to adopt Grice's construct of Conversational Principles in order to explain why people resort to using implicatures in order to be polite. She also extended this concern in considering the form of sentences or some specific ways of constructing sentences in order to express politeness.

Lakoff (1973 qtd. in Fraser, 1990) suggests two rules of Pragmatic Competence:

1. Be Clear (essentially Grice's maxims)

2. Be Polite

For Lakoff however, "politeness usually supercedes: it is considered more important in a conversation to avoid offense than to achieve clarity. This makes sense, since in most informal conversations, actual communication of important ideas is secondary to merely reaffirming and strengthening relationships.'"(1973: 297-298)

She also posits sub-maxims (sub-rules), adapted as follows:

***Rule 1:***Don't Impose (used when Formal/Impersonal Politeness is required)

***Rule 2****.* Give Options (used when Informal Politeness is required)

***Rule 3****:* Make A Feel Good (used when Intimate Politeness is required)

Each of these has an end goal to make the hearer 'feel good'. "Apolite action, according to Lakoff, “is such because it is in accord with the dictates of one or more of Rules 1, 2, 3, as is a polite utterance." (1973 : 303).

As different situations call for different types of and degrees of politeness, Leech (1983), classified illocutionary functions into four. The first two chiefly involve politeness:

1. Competitive: the illocutionary goal competes with the social goal; e.g. ordering, asking, demanding, begging.
2. Convivial: the illocutionary goal coincides with the social goal; e.g. offering, inviting, greeting, thanking, congratulating
3. Collaborative: the illocutionary goal i indifferent to the social goal; e.g. asserting, reporting, announcing, instructing
4. Conflictive: the illocutionary goal conflicts with the social goal; e.g. threatening, accusing, cursing, reprimanding

Where the illocutionary function is **competitive**, the interlocutors use negative politeness strategy in order to “reduce discord implicit in the competition between what speaker wants and what are good manners”. Where the illocutionary function is **convivial** which is intrinsically courteous, the interlocutors “seek opportunities for comity”.

Searle’s (1979) categories of illocutionary acts (mentioned in Leech, 1983) are worthy to be mentioned in this paper to show how politeness affects this categorization.

1. **Assertives** commit the speaker to the truth of the proposed proposition: e.g. stating, suggesting, boasting, complaining, claiming, reporting. These illocutions tend to be neutral as regards politeness (except **boasting** which is impolite) and are classified under the **collaborative** category.
2. **Directives** such as ordering, commanding, requesting, advising, and recommending are intended to produce action from the hearer; thus, these are classified under the competitive category. These therefore, call for negative politeness (except inviting which is intrinsically polite). Leech prefers **impositive** to replace the term **directives** in this classification.
3. **Commisives** such as promising, vowing, and offering are **convivial.**
4. **Expressives** such as thanking, congratulating, pardoning, blaming, praising, condoling, and many more tend to be convivial; hence, intrinsically polite.
5. **Declarations** such as resigning, dismissing, christening, appointing, sentencing, excommunicating, etc. are normally done by people who are authorized to do so within some institutional framework (judges, ministers of religions, etc.) They scarcely involve politeness.

These categories were also considered in the analysis of emails – the subject of this study.

Leech also proposes six Interpersonal Maxims (1983 mentioned in Fraser, 1990; Thomas, 1995) which may be considered in identifying and describing politeness in conversations and actions:

* *Tact Maxim:* Minimize hearer costs; maximize hearer benefit.
* *(Meta Maxim:* Do not put others in a position where they have to break the Tact Maxim.)
* *Generosity Maxim:* Minimize your own benefit; maximize your hearer's benefit.
* *Approbation Maxim :* Minimize hearer dispraise; maximize hearer praise.
* *Modesty Maxim:* Minimize self-praise; maximize self-dispraise.
* *Agreement Maxim:* Minimize disagreement between yourself and others; maximize agreement between yourself and others.
* *Sympathy Maxim:* Minimize antipathy between yourself and others; maximize sympathy between yourself and others.

***The Face-saving view***

Whether Little is correct or not in saying that “politeness is only one half good manners and the other half good lying” is interesting to consider. Why would a person in a conversation below flout the maxim of quantity and quality? According to Grice, a speaker “blatantly fails to observe a maxim, not intending to deceive or mislead, but to prompt the hearer to look for **a meaning which is different from, or in addition to, the expressed meaning**.”

Person A: Is her boyfriend handsome?

Person B: He looks kind.

For Leech (1983) B’ s answer is informative , but at the cost of being impolite to A. Therefore, B suppressed the desired information in order to uphold the politeness principle specifically to save the face of the hearer. It is what is not said that is more meaningful in this conversation and not just what the interlocutors are saying.

If Leech proposes that certain types of acts are inherently polite or impolite when he relates Searle’s categories of illocutionary functions with the politeness principles, Brown & Levinson (mentioned in Fraser, 1990) propose that such acts are inherently face-threatening to the speaker, to the hearer, or to both. They propose the following four-way analysis:

1. Acts threatening to the hearer's Negative Face: e.g., ordering, advising, threatening, warning;
2. Acts threatening to the hearer's Positive Face: e.g., complaining, criticizing, disagreeing, raising taboo topics;
3. Acts threatening to the speaker's Negative Face: e.g., accepting an offer, accepting thanks, promising unwillingly;
4. Acts threatening to the speaker's Positive Face: e.g., apologizing, accepting compliments, confessing.

These four-way analysis were used as part of the conceptual framework of this present study by way of identifying the acts employed by the writers of the emails.

***The conversational-contract view***

Fraser (1975), Fraser and Nolen (1981, cited by Fraser, 1990), elaborated the conversational-contract view (Fraser, 1990, Thomas, 1995). Fraser explains that “people are constrained in interaction” by a conversational contract i.e. people are polite because they are required by the event or situation in which they are in. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that norms of politeness are:

...renegotiable in light of the participants’ perception and/or acknowledgments of factors such as the status, the power, and the role of each speaker, and the nature of the circumstances.

Rational individuals are expected to behave within negotiated constraints and not being able to do so may run the risk of being branded impolite.

A number of studies on politeness are reviewed and presented here to further shed light to what has already been done in the field.

Elbert and Floyd (2004) conducted a study entitled “Affectionate Expressions as Face-Threatening Acts which aimed to examine the politeness implications of affectionate communications.

The study of Alfattah entitled “Politeness strategies in the English interlanguage requests of Yemeni Learners” attempted empirically to discover the ways in which Yemeni learners realize requests in their English interlanguage with special reference to politeness strategies as patterned by Brown and Levinson (1987). The main aim is to find out the politeness strategies used and the frequency of their use. This study of Alfattah is related to the present study inasmuch as the latter focused also on politeness strategies. However, the former study’s main objective is to investigate the strategies of requests and politeness phenomenon in the production of request speech act by 314 Yemeni learners of English as a foreign language. The present study made use of emails in the workplace in daily operation.

In India, Tamara (1994) validates that politeness is cultural. What is considered polite in one culture may not be considered polite in another and what is face-threatening in one society may not be so in another. Hence, politeness must be seen using what I call one’s own ”cultural lens”. One has to understand one’s culture to be able to appreciate the politeness strategies of its people when communicating with others.

For non-native speakers of English, acquiring pragmatic competence, especially politeness expressions poses great challenge since politeness in the target language is not expressed in the same way as in the local language. Although Brown and Levinson (1978) described the universality of politeness phenomena, they also admitted that there are two difficulties in expressing politeness: 1). the degree of expressing clear meanings (on record) and 2) the degree of expressing no coerciveness (off-record). Nakajima’s study (1997) tried to establish which experiences help Japanese business ESL speakers to develop the ability to use target –like politeness expressions instead of transferring them from Japanese pragmatics and confirmed that “living experience in the target culture helps learners to acquire target-like pragmatics” (64).

**Conceptual Framework:**

This paper analyzed the emails of the participants following the framework (adopted from Brown & Levinson, 1987):

 

Say something say nothing (use non-verbal language)

On record off-record (e.g. talking/thinking aloud to self)

Face saving act bald on record (performing an FTA without redress)

Positive politeness negative politeness

(e.g. solidarity strategy) (e.g. deference strategy)

**Figure 1: Framework adopted from Brown and Levinson (1****987)**

**Off-Record (indirect)**:    The speaker is removing himself/herself from any imposition whatsoever.

Hinting:  
"It's cold in here."

Being vague:  
"Perhaps someone should have been more responsible."

Being sarcastic, or joking:  
"Yeah, he's a real rocket scientist!"

**Bald on-record:**    The most direct approach using imperative forms. A person who uses this will most likely shock, embarrass, or offend the person to whom s/he is speaking to unless s/he knows the other person very well and they are both comfortable with each other as among family members and friends or when an emergency calls for the direct approach.

An Emergency:  
HELP!!

Task oriented:  
Start eating!

Request:  
Remove your coat

Alerting:  
Stop texting when driving!

**Positive Politeness**:    It is usually seen in groups of friends or when the people involve try to minimize the social distance through expression of friendliness, or where people in the given social situation know each other fairly well. They express solid interest in the hearer's need to be respected (minimize the FTA).

Attend to the hearer:  
“Make yourself comfortable. How about some coffee?"

Avoid disagreement:  
A: " Is the report okay?"  
B: "Yes, yes. It’s okay. Not very grand but it’s okay."

Assume agreement:  
"So when are you joining us?"

Hedge opinion:  
"I would like to say that...you really should sort of try harder."

**Negative Politeness**:    The objective for using this strategy is to assume that the speaker may be imposing on the hearer, and intruding on their space. Therefore, these automatically assume that there might be some social distance or awkwardness in the situation.

Be indirect:  
"I think I need a ruler here."   
The speaker hopes not to ask directly, so as not to impose and take up the hearer's time hence, s/he uses this indirect strategy hoping that the hearer will look for a ruler for the speaker.

Asking Forgiveness/Apologizing:  
"Forgive me for ...."

Minimize imposition:  
"I just wanted to know if I could use your laptop?"

Pluralize the person responsible:  
"We remind you to submit the report by Monday."  
This takes off the responsibility from the speaker only onto “we” even if the s/he is the one totally responsible for telling the hearer about the deadline of submission.

The strategies just discussed can be grouped into five super strategies. Longcope explicitly mentioned that the higher the nu mber of the strategy, the more polite it is.



Where requests are expressed in the emails the CCSARP (Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project Coding Manual by Blum-Kulka, House, and Casper (1989) was used. As such the usual request sequence may include the following:

* Alerters. These are terms of endearment or forms of address; they usually precede the actual request. These serve as attention getters.
* Proposed supportive moves. These act as supports for the realization of a particular request. They may function to either mitigate or to aggravate a request. Mitigating suportive moves may also be classified as:

1. a preparator as in the example: *May I request you…*
2. getting a pre-commitment: e.g. *Could you do this for me?*
3. Grounders are explanations, reasons, or justifications for the request

* Request proper or Head Act. This is the part of the sequence which might serve to realize the act independently of other elements and can vary on two dimensions according to (A)strategy type and (B) perspective.

1. Strategy Types. CCSARP classified nine strategy types as follows:
2. mood derivable: utterances in which the grammatical mood of the verb signals illocutionary force (‘Don’t waste my time.’; ‘Clean up your mess.’
3. performatives: utterances in which the illocutionary force is explicitly mentioned. (‘I am asking you not to waste my time.’)
4. hedged performatives. Utterances in which the naming of the illocutionary force is modified by hedging expressions (‘I would like to request your office to allow me to attend the said conference.’)
5. obligation statements: utterances which state the obligation of the hearer to carry out the act (‘You’ll have to return the book on time.’)
6. want statements: utterances which state the speaker’s desire that the hearer carreis out the act (‘I really wish you attend the meeting on time.’)
7. suggestory formulae: utterances which contain a suggestion to do x (‘How about coming to the meeting on time?’)
8. query preparatory: utterances containing reference to preparatory conditions (e.g. ability, willingness) (‘Would you mind cleaning your cubicles before the school accreditation?’)
9. strong hints: utterances containing partial reference to object or element needed for the implememtation of the act (‘You have left your classroom airconditoning unit on.’)
10. mind hints: utterances that make no reference to the request proper (or any of its elements) but are interrpetable as requests by context. (‘I am busy right now.’ in response to a persistent request for appointment.)

Blum-Kulka (1987, 1996) further re-classified these nine types into (a) direct strategies (strategies 1 to 5), (b) conventionally indirect strategies (strategies 6 and 7), and (c) nonconventionally indirect strategies (strategies 8 and 9).

1. Perspective. Requests can emphasize the role of the interlocutors:
2. emphasis is on the agent or actor and be *speaker-oriented* (‘Can I attend the seminar for free?’)
3. focus on the role of the recipient and be *hearer-oriented* (‘Can you attend the seminar?’)
4. inclusive. Focus both on the speaker and hearer (‘Can we start the meeting on time?’)
5. impersonal. (‘It needs to be communicated to everyone.’)

These four alternatives may be used in combination at a certain time or situation, although not necessarily about a single request only.

* Downgraders and Upgraders. Downgraders are meant to soften a request and lessen the imposition to the recipient while upgraders emphasize the degree or coerciveness (House & kasper, 1981 qtd. In Blum-Kulka, 1996). *Consultative devices* such as ***Do you think***and understaters such as ‘I have a ***small*** request to make’ and the upgraders- intensifiers such as ‘Submit that ***too-late*** report’ may act both as ***indicating devices*** (i.e. used to signal pragmatic force) and as ***sociopragmatic force*** (i.e. meant to alter the social impact the utterance is likely to make (Blum-Kulka, 1987 qtd. In Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1996).

**Methodology**

**Research Subjects**

The participants in this study are fourteen persons from a single workplace- a tertiary, non-profit, Catholic, exclusive for girls academic institution. Six of these participants are considered subordinates (lower in rank than the writer); three of them are non-teaching personnel and the other three are faculty members lower in rank than the writer of this paper. Six of the participants are administrators who can therefore be considered equal in rank to this writer. Two faculty members and one from the administrators are considered her peers or close friends.

**Data-Gathering**

No instrument was used to gather the data, but only emails which were sent and received by the respondents in the second semester of School-year 2011-2012. **Forty one** emails from these respondents were considered for analysis.

**Procedure**

The researcher followed the following steps in doing this research:

1. Permission was sought from the top administrators and from the target participants to conduct this study.
2. Sample emails were requested from the respondents.
3. The emails were subjected to qualitative analysis.

**Results and Discussion**

**Question No. 1**. What specific politeness strategies were used by interlocutors in their emails:

1.1. by/from supervisors to their subordinates?

1.2. by/from subordinates to their supervisors?

1.3. by/from interlocutors to their colleagues of similar rank/ position?

**Answer:**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Politeness Strategies | by/from supervisors to their subordinates | by/from subordinates to their supervisors | by/from interlocutors to their colleagues of similar rank/ position |
| Off- record |  |  |  |
| Bald-on record | 2 |  |  |
| Positive Politeness | 2 | 9 | 12 |
| Negative Politeness | 6 | 3 | 8 |
| Summary | 10 | 11 | 20 |
| TOTAL |  |  | 41 |

**Table 1: Politeness strategies used by the interlocutors**

It is observed that people in the workplace go for direct speech acts most of the time in their effort to avoid misunderstanding. Flouting the maxims is normally expected to be avoided; otherwise, different interpretations may lead to deviant behaviours or actions which may affect cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness in the performance of functions.

The emails of the respondents reveal the following:

1. No off-record strategy could be accounted for inasmuch as the data are all emails;
2. Bold-on record strategy was also noted among the supervisors while none is noted among subordinates and among those who belong to ‘equal rank’ in the organization. For the subordinates in an organization who exercise less power, it is predictable that they do not use this strategy. Doing so might put them in a negative evaluation of having ‘impolite/rude behavior’ which is not approved in the organization especially in Philippine context where regard to the superiors is akin to deference or respect towards the elderly in the family. For those who belong to the same rank in the organization, not employing a bold-on strategy is a solidarity strategy leading towards preservation of friendliness in the organization.
3. Positive politeness was noted to be greater among subordinates; this finding can be explained by their social role in the organization. They normally do not employ FTAs in order to preserve camaraderie in the organization towards fulfilling a common goal. The same was noted among those who belong to similar ranks. They showed more connection by appealing to the hearer’s positive face. Considering the writer’s request for permission to use the emails of the participants, only one had shown a bit of apprehension and had expressed a partial confirmation to the request; however, the participant used a face-saving strategy by asking how to further help the researcher in some other ways.

Dear First name,

I am okay to send to you the emails I sent to you but I feel uncomfortable of sending to you emails I sent to people higher or equal or below me. I cannot speak for them - recipients or senders of these emails. What suggestions can you give so that I may be of help?

Among the supervisors, it was noted that they used negative politeness more than positive politeness. Despite the power they have, most supervisors resort to negative politeness rather than imposition.

Dear All,

Happy New Year!

Since there is a CAS general faculty meeting on January 16, 2012, let us have our meeting on the same day from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. - one hour for the meeting and other hour for lunch (on the Department). Our agenda:

In the above example, the sender ( a supervisor) used the pronouns “us and our” – pluralizing the pronouns as a mitigating strategy- to involve the faculty members in the decision appealing to their cooperation rather than ordering them to come to a meeting which is an act that is threatening to the hearer's Negative Face.

1. Requests follow a certain sequence: After the alerter (salutation) explicit performatives are used in the Head act which is normally preceded by a downdgrader. A gounder (reason or justification for the request) follows. The example below demonstrates this sequence:

Dear Sir First name,

Good day! Kindly (*downgrader + Head Act*) remind the participants of the The Cs in Effective Business Writing to take the diagnostic exam. The test is an integral part of the program because this will help us assess the writing proficiency of your staff. (*grounder)* The schedule are as follows:

(schedule)

Thanks, *(closing)*

Full name

1. Perspectives change even in single emails. Shifts from speaker-oriented to hearer-oriented texts are noted among the junior supervisors’ emails than among the senior supervisors. The strong use of the verb “need” in the example below is noted to be “least polite’ among the sample emails. This is taken as an expression of displeasure to a job that was not completed as expected. Nonetheless, the use of *please* before the second Head act serves as a lexical downgrader as it softens the impact of the utterance and brings back the politeness in the message.

Dear Nickname, (*Alerter*)

Hi. (*alerter followed by a Head Act)*) I need the schedule of classes of Ms. A with B and C and D with E. You forgot to endorse to me that D and E will start their class today. (supportive move but is considered an expression of reprimand) Please (*downgrader + Head act)* )send me the schedule so I can make new attendance sheets for all of them. .

Thanks

Nickname

**Question No.2**. What is the structure/format of the emails used by each group?

**Answer:**

The emails followed the usual format of an email as this is already fixed and programmed. The parentheses in the illustration below means *optionality.*

Salutation (alerter 1)

Greetings (alerter 2)

BODY (Preposed supportive move/s) + (downgraders/ upgraders)+ Request proper or Head act + (postposed supportive move/s)

(Closing)

((Title)Full name/ Nickname)

When it comes to the body of the emails, the following were noted:

Politeness which is shown to other people by virtue of their higher status, greater age, or superiority is not really interesting to a pragmatist according to Thomas (1995) since it is an expected behaviour. Deference according to Thomas, though equated with politeness is more of a sociolinguistic phenomenon than a concern of a pragmatist. In the workplace, the use of words of address such as “Sir” or “Madam” to someone of higher rank or status seems “obligatory” reflecting the “sense of role or place in a given situation according to social conventions” (Thomas, 1995).

The data reveal the following:

1. Emails by/ from supervisors to subordinates show that supervisors would normally use an endearment word “Dear with a first name or pet name to alert an individual or an endearment word “dear” plus a collective noun/pronouns (all or colleagues) to refer to a group of people;
2. all those in the lower rank use terms of endearment with a title, endearment with a title and surname or at least the words of address such as “Sir” or “Madam” as a salutation in emails sent to people of higher rank. This is not really pragmatically interesting since the register of the conversation and the social roles of the interlocutors gave them an **obligatory** option. There is however, some plurality in the way they address their supervisors- from the most formal to less informal “Hi/Hello Sir or Ma’am + First Name to no salutation at all. This could be attributed to the social distance or relationship that exists between the subordinates and their supervisors.
3. Among the supervisors, it was noted that they would normally use an endearment term before they mention the first name of the subordinate whether the latter is a teaching or non-teaching employee. There seems to be no social distinction between non-teaching personnel and members of the faculty in the way the supervisors alert them in the emails.
4. Among those who belong to similar ranks, plurality was also noted in the way they alerted the recipients of their emails but there was more inclination for them to use the formal Endearment + Title/Rank + Surname/ First Name alerter than among the supervisors. This is an expression of politeness showing their respect to their colleagues even if they are relatively occupying or holding similar ranks. For those who used first names or salutation alone, friendship or close relationship was noted to have been established; thus, formality would perhaps bring awkwardness rather than camaraderie when used among them.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Type of Alerters used | by/from supervisors to their subordinates | . by/from subordinates to their supervisors | by/from interlocutors to their colleagues of similar rank/ position |
| Endearment Term + Title (Dear Dr./Prof.) |  |  |  |
| Endearment Term + address (Dear Sir/Madam) |  | 1 |  |
| Endearment Term + Title/ Rank + Surname (Dear Dr./Prof. Surname) |  | 2 | 8 |
| Endearment Term +  Surname |  |  |  |
| Endearment Term + Ms./Mr. +First Name | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Endearment Term + First Name | 3 |  |  |
| First Name |  |  |  |
| Address Ms/Mr/ + Pet name |  |  | 1 |
| Endearment Term + Collective Noun/Pronoun (Dear All/ Colleagues) | 3 |  |  |
| Endearment Term + Pet Name | 1 |  |  |
| Pet Name/ First Name |  |  |  |
| Title + Surname |  |  | 1 |
| Salutation Hi/Hello + First Name/ Pet Name | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Salutation Hi/Hello + Informal Title + Pet Name (Hi Doc First /Pet name) |  |  | 1 |
| No salutation |  | 1 | 4 |
| Summary | 11 | 9 | 21 |
| TOTAL |  |  | 41 |

**Table 2: Alerters used in the emails**

**Table 3** shows the type of closing and signature used by the participants in this study:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Type of closing and signature used** | by/from supervisors to their subordinates | . by/from subordinates to their supervisors | by/from interlocutors to their colleagues of similar rank/ position |
| No closing |  | **1** | **1** |
| Pet Name | **5** | **5** | **14** |
| First Name | **3** |  | **2** |
| Pet Name + Surname |  | **1** |  |
| First Name + Surname |  | **2** | **3** |
| Expressions (e.g. of Thanks |  |  | **2** |
| Expressions + Pet Name |  | **1** | **1** |
| Summary | **8** | **10** | **23** |
| TOTAL |  |  | **41** |

**Table 3: Type of Closing and signature used in emails**

The data reveal that most of the respondents across groups used their Pet Names or first names as closing and signature. The supervisors soften their stance by using their pet names or first names as a solidarity strategy to their subordinates. The fixed signature programmed with the full name of the sender and his/her position appears in the emails of all the administrators (although they were erased in the attached copy of the emails to protect the anonymity of the participants in this study). In the first email sent by the sender, the full name or pet name of the sender appears on top of the fixed/programmed signature. For formal communications, only the fixed signature appears at the bottom but nobody among the participants used their formal/fixed signature when making follow-ups with individual persons.

When addressed to a group or to the entire community, the formal memo structure is being used in circulation. All the parts of a memo are indicated together with the fixed signature of the sender. Informality sets in when individuals make follow-ups. Both the administrator and the subordinate employ positive politeness in most cases.

Below is an example of a conversation between a faculty subordinate and supervisor:

**Email 1:**

Dear Colleagues,

May we invite you to a roundtable discussion on “\_\_Title of event\_" to be given to Dr. Full name from \_\_\_\_\_\_ University of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and another discussion on "\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_" by Dr. Full name also from the same university. This will be held on \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_(Tuesday) from 4:30-6:30 PM, at \_\_\_\_\_ Room.

Thank you for your kind attention.

RSVP by January 19, 2012 c/o \_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_

Nickname (administrator)

**Email 2:**

Dear Dr. Last name,

Thank you for the invitation. I will attend the discussion.

Nick name (subordinate)

**Email 3:**

Thanks Nickname. See you then

Nickname

Email 1 is an act that is threatening to the hearer's Negative Face since this is a request.

*May we invite you*  is an example of strategy 1 (‘be conventionally indirect’), this is also an example of strategy 4 (“minimize imposition”);

*Thank you for your kind attention* is an example of strategy 10 (go on record as incurring a debt”) (Brown & Levinson, 1987 mentioned in Thomas, 1995).

*RSVP by January 19, 2012 c/o \_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_* is a direct bold-on record strategy which appears to be different in style from the first sentences.

Emails 2 and 3 are acts that are threatening to the speaker's Negative Face since both express accepting an offer and accepting thanks. But they also express positive politeness since they express solidarity with the positive face wants of the administrator.

**Question No. 3**. What linguistic structures do the emails employ to effect specific functions or goals such as request, imposition, and apology?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Function | Linguistic Structure |
| May I be at the meeting at around 11:30 a.m.?  May I invite you to come...  May we ask you to facilitate Phonetics?  May I ask you for your availability on May 12, 2012? | Asking permission from a superior or a subordinate | Use of modal MAY to ask permission |
| Sure Ma’am  No problem. | Accepting request | Sure = a Word that means YES |
| I give permission...  I need to know the schedule... | Declaring | S + V + DO |
| Is it okay to use... | Asking permission | Hedging |
| Sorry. So tired for the week... | Apologizing | Short “sorry” –an expression |
| Thank you for... | Expressing gratitude (expressive) | Direct expression of feelings |
|  |  |  |

Table 4: Linguistic structures and functions used in emails

Since most of the emails are either impositives (directives), commisives, and expressives, the language used in the emails are inherently polite. Although hedging is one of the linguistic strategies to show politeness, this was not so explored in the samples since ***conciseness*** is being observed in writing. In emails, saying “sorry” and “thank you” are already recognized to be polite, although in spoken form, hedging such as saying “I would like to thank you for...” is described to be more sincere and polite. That expression appears in formal situations when social distance is observed among interlocutors. For a group of people in the workplace who have established close relationship, circumlocution is found to be inappropriate.

**Conclusion**

Emails unlike spoken form are easier to analyze when the data needed for analysis are made to be available.

In this study, there is no other better proof of positive politeness shown to the writer of this paper than the approval given by the participants to the researcher to be part of this study.

There is no other better proof of negative politeness shown to the participants of this study than the request made by the researcher and her humble acceptance of the conditions set by the participants. Indirectness was used because indirect illocutions tend to be more polite because they increase the degree of optionality i.e. the hearer may have the option to say “yes” or “no” and because there is a diminished and tentative force in the utterance (Leech, 1983).

The data of this study can still be further explored considering other features of politeness principle such as the maxims proposed by Leech (1983).

What is more interesting is what is meant in those emails that were not actually mentioned or given by the participants. It is quite difficult to ascertain further people’s meanings when the tracks of the complete conversations are not accounted for because the people’s face is threatened by the very nature of the study and the researcher is left with considering saving the face not only of the people involved in the study but of the very institution they are working in.

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**APPENDIX A**

**Letter Asking Permission from Respondents**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

March 22, 2012

Dear Friends and Colleagues:

I would like to seek your permission for me to use some of your emails either sent to you, to me or to someone else within our school (with higher, lower, and same rank as yours).

My main problem is on pragmatic analysis of emails in the workplace: emails which are sent to you or by you, from a person of higher rank, same rank (your friends and colleagues), or from the lower rank (from secretaries, etc.)

**My Main Problem:** What politeness strategies are employed by interlocutors in their emails?

In this paper, I am more concerned on the pragmatic strategies used by the participants in their day-to-day emails and not exactly on specific content. It is on "what people do with words" according to Pragmatist Austin that is of most interest in the analysis and not just on what they "actually" say in print.

The following are my sub-problems:

1. What specific politeness strategies were used by interlocutors in their emails :

1.1. by/from supervisors to their subordinates?

1.2. by/from  subordinates to their supervisors?

1.3. by/from interlocutors to their colleagues of similar rank/ position?

2. What is the structure/format of the emails used by each group?

3. What linguistic structures do the emails employ to effect specific functions or goals such as imposition, coercion, apology, request, etc.?

The period of coverage of the emails are those sent and received within the second semester of the current school-year.

As soon as I have received your approval, I will be erasing the TO and FROM fields of the emails to protect the anonymity of the participants in this study.  All other details will be strictly held in confidence. Nevertheless, it is required to seek your permission for this study as part of ethics in research, hence I request you to sign this document.

***I pray for your positive response.***

Sincerely yours,

Elineth Elizabeth L. Suarez