

THE ROLE OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN WRITING EMAILS

***Fatima Fotouhi and Fatemeh Ziyaei**

Islamic Azad University, Qeshm International Branch, Qeshm, Iran

**Author for Correspondence*

ABSTRACT

Politeness is an essential ingredient in a great variety of professional communication situations, so interpersonal relation and politeness strategies have become increasingly important in practically all professional setting. Most of the research related to politeness has focused on daily communication. There has been extensive research on politeness in professional written discourse in writing. Computer-mediated communication, such as email, offer us a chance to understand how social relationships are built and maintained in an environment in which interlocutors are not face to face with each other and also have little time to develop rules of conduct. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) people will use certain politeness strategies to enhance face between themselves and their interlocutors. These strategies will depend on the level of intimacy between the participants and the seriousness of the situation. In this study I compare the politeness strategies used by 25 participants in writing emails to close friends and to strangers. I analyze two features of language in the emails. This study investigates how people employ certain politeness strategies when discussing taboo topic in the domain of emails. In the field of speech act studies, most of the research related to politeness has focused on daily communication. However researchers have paid more and more attention to specific fields of communication, for instance, technical written and business communication, to explore the features of speech acts in different registers. This study investigated politeness strategies in writing emails that were written by 25 students of the language learning institute. It examined the use of politeness strategies in relation to the communicators and the degree of intimacy.

Keywords: *Email Communication, Level of Intimacy, Politeness Strategies, Taboo Topic*

INTRODUCTION

Since the early days of email, researchers realized that this new medium of communication had new conventions that did not fully belong to spoken or written varieties of language. (Shapiro & Anderson) Emails were a fundamentally new medium with significantly new characteristics that can not be treated with the old rules alone. Researchers realized that this new medium of communication had affected cultural value, workplace environment and language use. Successful communication entails not only the knowledge of grammar and text organization, but also the pragmatic aspects of the target language.

Cohen (2008) pointed out that many advanced language learners are able to utilize complex linguistic systems, but are unable to express and interpret meaning in order to perform language functions appropriately, such as examples, apologies, asking. Politeness is a term used to describe the rational, rule-governed, pragmatic aspect of speech that is rooted in the human need to maintain relationships and avoid conflicts (Janney & Arndt, 2003). Because avoiding conflict is one of the goals of politeness, taboos are especially helpful for a study about politeness strategies. When we communicate about a sensitive topic, we often become more careful with our languages, using politeness strategies to avoid social awkwardness. Email, which falls under the broad category of computer-mediated communication (CMC), is also an important medium of language to study because it is a relatively new and unique form of communication. The use of emails is so new and widespread, so it offers a unique opportunity to study how humans have adapted to a new form of communication. As Al-shalawi (2001) stated it, study of CMC can provide us with a crucial direction leading to the understanding of how the principles of social relationships are realized in a new form of language.

Background

This study contributes to the language used in emails focusing on politeness strategies used by students. Linguistic politeness is a relatively new sub-field of linguistics that has received a great deal of literature.

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Yet, it remains a fuzzy term despite the fact that it is a crucial element of interpersonal communication in all cultures.

It is a communication strategy used by people to maintain good relationships among them. According to many researchers (Holms, 2006; Brown, 2004; Watts, 2003) politeness could be defined as means of expressing consideration for others. The concept of face was first proposed by Erving Goffman who defined it as “the positive social value that a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”.

Then it was defined by Brown and Levinson (1987) as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself”. In any interaction, this “self-image” could be maintained or lost. Each participant in communication aims to maintain both their and others face via recognizing others desires and understanding their desires.

Many theories have been proposed in the area of politeness such as Lakoff (1975) maxims of politeness, Grice (1975) cooperative principle (CP) and Leech (1983) worked on politeness but Brown and Levinson (1978, 1978) theory has remained the most seminal and influential in the area of politeness.

The study of politeness seeks to find the motive behind choosing a less direct course action in language. Brown and Levinson see this factor as the negotiation of face. According to Brown and Levinson there are two different types of face desires: positive face and negative face. Negative face is the desire that one's actions be unobstructed by others while positive face is the desire that one's wants be pleasing to others.

We are usually trying to avoid damaging face, by adjust our choice of words in order to protect the interlocutors. Exactly how we adjust our language depends on our perception of the conditions of the exchange and of the role of the producer and recipient. Positive politeness strategies include exaggerating interest, using group identity markers, avoiding disagreement and assert common ground. Negative politeness's strategies include being reluctant, apologize and use passive voice.

Brown and Levinson claim that there are three factors that people assess when they choose politeness strategy. Social distance is defined in terms of similarity and frequency of interaction and intimacy. It is important to keep in mind that both negative and positive face desires occur to some degree at the same time.

Tanskanen's (1998) study examined politeness strategies used in a mailing list discussion group. This study sound that many spoken language strategies were also found in the discussion group, including the use of hedge and third person pronouns.

A 2001 study by Al-shalawi found that Brown and Levinson's theory could not adequately account for politeness strategies disagreements. Al-shawali concluded that the dichotomous concept of face as either positive or negative was not supported by the interpretation of most of the politeness strategies in the study. Based on the framework from Brown and Levinson, we can make predictions about how certain language features will be used. We will compare the results of the emails to the predictions made by the Brown and Levinson framework, to determine if the framework can be applied to email communication.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methods

Participants

The participants for this study consisted of 25 students of the language learning institute who voluntary elected to take part in this project. Four of the surveys were rejected because participants did not meet the criteria for the study.

Participants were collected for age (16_32years old) and language (all native speakers of Persian). Age was chosen as a control because politeness strategies may vary with different age groups. The language was selected as criteria, because I believed that the information being examined would relate to highly sensitive culturally shared knowledge.

Language taboos and politeness strategies vary culture to culture and this particular study does not seek to examine difference between cultures.

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Instrument

For this study a DCT was administered to the participants. The DCT is an instrument used to collect sociolinguistic data. Discourse completion test (DCT) can be used as a test of intercultural communicative and pragmatic competence.

Traditional DCTs give a sociological context and ask respondents to provide a speech act appropriate for the given situation. This gives the researcher an idea of the pragmatic linguistic repertoire of the respondents, allowing them to make indirect assumptions about respondent's sociological pragmatic knowledge or sociological pragmatic competence.

It can show a clear understanding of their interpretation of pragmatic linguistic unit A DCT uses a constructed environment to elicit certain parts of discourse and to use the findings to make predictions about natural language.

In the analysis of spoken language this method has been criticized as being a somewhat ineffective tool, due to the vast differences between written and spoken language (Billmyer and Varghese, 2000). DCT usually ask participants to write down what they think they would say in a certain scenario.

The use of a DCT for this study allowed people to complete the task in their usual environmental and at their regular pace. The DCT was designed to examine distance variable. Distance was examined by having participants write to a close friend and a stranger.

Data Analysis Procedures

When the DCTs had been collected, they resulted in 84 emails, which were compiled and coded for two different language features: Euphemism and Dysphemism. This category was selected from some of the features discussed by Brown and Levinson (1987) and by examination the results of the DCT, which showed that these features were used in abundance and with variation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the emails compared based on the predictions made by the Brown and Levinson framework, to determine if the framework can be applied to email communication. The expected results are displayed in the table below. The greater the taboo, the more negative politeness strategies should be used.

As the taboo decrease, positive politeness strategies should be used. The table shows the predicted use of politeness strategies according to intimacy. More negative politeness strategies are expected in the emails to the stranger, while more positive politeness strategies are expected in the emails to the close friend.

	Close friend	Stranger
Negative politeness strategies	fewer	more
Positive politeness strategies	more	fewer

Euphemism and Dysphemism

Euphemism was defined as any word or phrase which tends to have a more positive way of expressing a taboo than the neutral word for the topic.

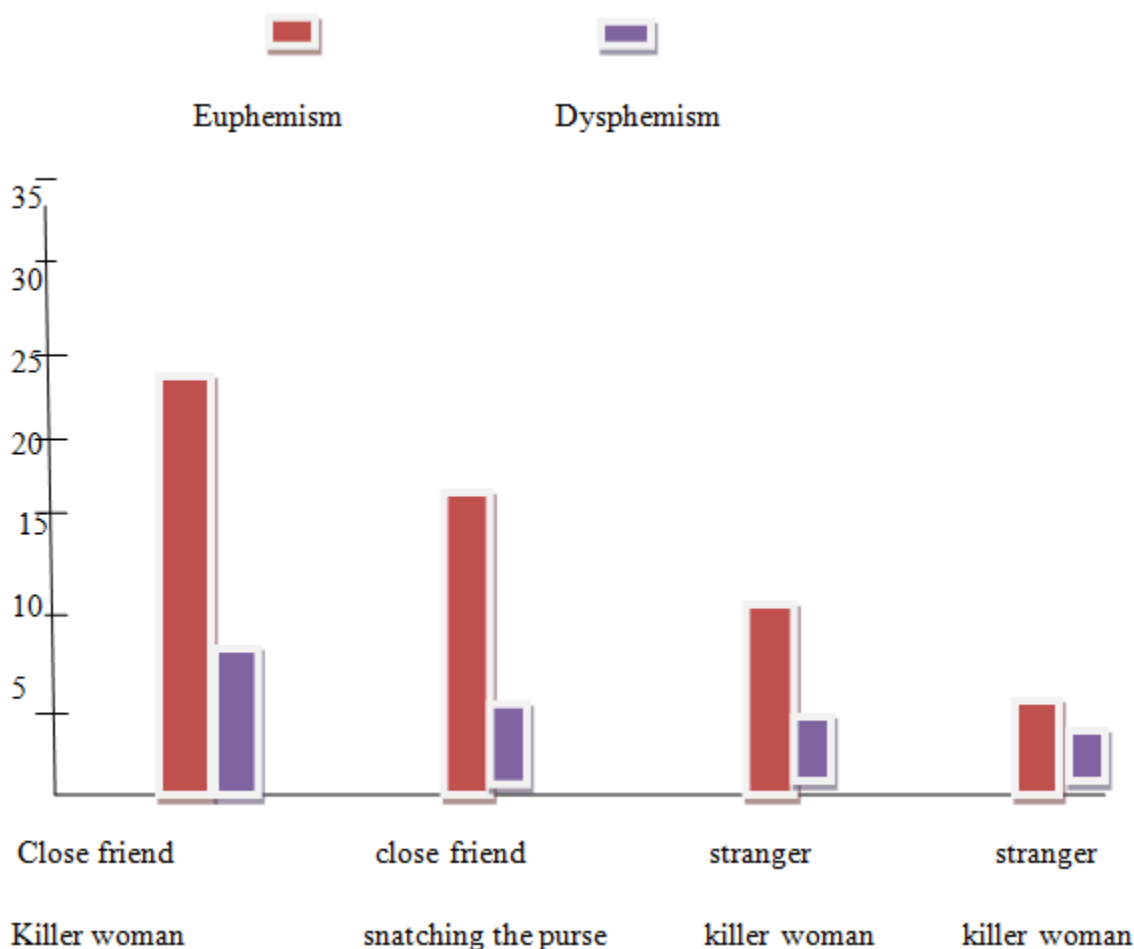
For example, old was considered a neutral, while older was considered euphemistic. Dysphemism were counted as words which portray things in a more negative view than the neutral word. For examples: fat, old granny

Many euphemisms were used throughout all of the emails. This ranking is consistent with the predictions based on Brown and Levinson's frame work, and has been somewhat consistent in throughout this study. This is also seen in the use of dysphemism, which was fairly low in all emails.

There are two pictures that were used in this study:

Snatching the purse in the street, professional killer woman

The results are shown in the diagram.



As would be expected in the case of discussing taboos, many euphemisms were used throughout all of the emails. The pictures of the killer woman had highest count of euphemism overall, followed by the snatching purse.

This ranking is consistent with the predictions based on Brown and Levinson's framework.

This is also seen in the case of dysphemisms, which was nearly low in all emails.

Another Point

The manner of spelling and the length of the emails seemed to be a high level of spelling errors throughout both sets of emails. Some spelling errors were significant and frequent enough that it made emails difficult to understand. This is an interesting to consider when investigating how much effort we put into our language choice in order to achieve certain intent.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the Brown and Levinson's framework for politeness does not accurately predict how politeness will be used in emails. Although some of the predictions were correct, most of the results were in contrast to what Brown and Levinson predict for face to face interaction. Instead, email is developing unique set of politeness strategies, very different than those used in face to face communication.

Politeness strategies in emails appear to be developing in a way that includes high levels of negative politeness strategies. There is a decrease in negative politeness strategies when there is a decrease in intimacy, something we do not see in face to face interactions.

The limitations of this study are small number of variables and language features. It would also be helpful to examine data from a large and more wide ranging statistical study, including speakers of other

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languages and people with different proficiencies in their second language. In order to understand more about how politeness is used in emails, the data quantified in this paper should be tested against more naturalistic data and situation.

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