Politeness in written business discourse: A textlinguistic perspective on requests

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Abstract

This article examines the principles and practices of politeness strategies in business communication. The sequential realization of selected face-redress strategies in and around requests is analyzed on the text level in business letters located in a discourse-dynamic perspective. The article demonstrates that the level, form and distribution of positive and negative politeness correlate with sender status and vary as a function of the dynamics of the course of business communication. The article advocates that monitoring politeness strategies on the text level gives valuable insight into the norms that govern British business communication.

1. Introduction

Politeness theory has enjoyed a privileged position on the forefront of pragmatic attention in the past decade and although scrutinized and criticized from many quarters (e.g. Coupland, 1983; Coupland et al., 1988; Held, 1989; Janney and Arndt, 1993; Kasper, 1990; Watts, 1992), it remains very much alive as witnessed among others by a recent bibliography by DuFon et al. (1994).

Politeness theory and related areas, such as discourse and conversation analysis and studies of interethnic communication, have primarily drawn on observations from empirical studies of spoken language and have mostly focused on face-to-face interaction in non-professional settings, and where politeness has been studied in professional settings the focus has mainly been on oral interaction (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1990; Erickson and Shultz, 1982; Fiksdal, 1988; Linde, 1988).

Furthermore, the majority of studies discussing pragmatic aspects of linguistic politeness have made little use of corpus data and have largely ignored the importance and complexity of non-linguistic parameters. They have often discussed the subject based on self-invented utterances made in a social vacuum (Holmes, 1988; Stubbs, 1983). This situation has presumably arisen because politeness theory takes as its starting point speech act analysis, where the object of analysis is everyday
face-to-face communication and the level of analysis is single utterances with minimal specification of co-text and context.

Surprisingly few studies (e.g. Cherry, 1988; Hagge and Kostelnick, 1989; Marrier, 1992; Myers, 1989; Pilegaard, 1989, 1990a) have so far applied politeness theory in studies of written language and language for specific purposes (LSP), although this would seem to represent both an interesting and very productive extension of the model.

The traditional notional apparatus in speech act theory is essentially sentence-based and speaker-oriented (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 10). However, politeness results not only from the use of individual politeness strategies expressed at the sentence level. Rather, it is the result of a number of illocutionary acts intricately wound together in the text, as shown e.g. by hedged presequences in directive speech acts as observed by Stubbs (1983), or as discussed by Rosengren (1983). Although a valuable, intuitively correct starting point, speech act theory will only be able to provide a full account of politeness strategies if a sequential perspective is adopted. In the present article, politeness strategies are therefore not analyzed only at the sentence level. This article adopts a broader perspective and analyzes how strategies combine at the micro-level, i.e. within sentences, how they combine across sentences, and how they operate on the textual macro-level, i.e. as clusters of strategies anchored in specific sections of the letters.

The situational context in which the letter is formulated closely guides the strategic choice of precisely that verbal behavior which maximally satisfies the speaker’s communicative intentions at any given time during a typical course of transactions. These transactions often evolve as a series of steps that follow each other logically and temporally. Thus, a seller’s first contact with a new buyer will often be by way of a sales letter, which may be followed by a quotation (e.g. stating price and terms), and if the buyer does not pay, by a reminder. Inversely, a buyer will usually send an inquiry before making an order. We may therefore say that in business letters, convention and the legal framework of the extralinguistic context affect the choice of strategies and strategy combinations. Politeness must be seen in a dynamic perspective which includes the extralinguistic dimension.

2. Material

The material consists of business letters drawn from a corpus collected by Cambridge University, England and analyzed at the Aarhus School of Business, Denmark. A total of 323 letters were randomly drawn from the corpus and divided into three categories (see Fig. 1). The first category ‘making contact’ consists of 25 sales letters, 25 inquiries and 75 ‘other letters’, the primary aim of which is to make or maintain contact between business partners. The second category, ‘negotiating’, consists of 25 quotations, 25 orders and 75 ‘other letters’ concerned with some element of negotiation. The third category, ‘in conflict’ is less well represented in the corpus and therefore only contains 15 reminders, 9 complaints and 49 ‘other letters’ on matters about which the parties are in conflict.
The corpus is unique in the sense that it is a comprehensive (793 letters), up-to-date material (1979–1991) of uncensured English business letters, which are usually not available for linguistic analysis. Part of the corpus (approx. 15–18%) consists of exchanges of letters. The letters have been selected from more than 40 different companies’ non-segmented market communication. All 323 letters presented here were written by and to native speakers of British English, and all were individual letters addressed to a specific, named receiver.

The business letter types are part of a business communication sequence in which they follow one another logically and temporally as described above. Searlean felicity conditions were used as classification criteria: Each type of business letter is defined by its propositional content, preparatory preconditions, conditions of sincerity, and essential conditions. For example the sales letter is defined as follows: its main proposition includes the seller’s praising of a commodity or service offered for sale on relatively unspecified conditions. The seller wants to find a buyer, wants the buyer to buy the object offered for sale or make an inquiry concerning the object. The seller assumes that the recipient is a potential buyer and does not expect the buyer to make the initial inquiry; cooperativeness is conventionally expected. The distance between the parties is usually great and the use of adequate politeness strategies may solve the sender’s dual problem in this situation: to persuade the recipient that the offer is sensible and advantageous, and to make him respond favorably to the letter.

Letters within the three categories ‘making contact’, ‘negotiating’, and ‘in conflict’ that did not satisfy all of the Searlean felicity criteria set up for the specific letter types were grouped ‘other letters’. Within the category ‘making contact’, a further characteristic of these ‘other letters’ is, for example, their absence or subordination of directive to informative purposes. Propositions are typically concerned with notifications (changes of address, price rises, visits, takeovers, mergers), gratulations (birthdays, seasonal holiday greetings), etc. ‘Other letters’ in the ‘negotiating’ category serve the purpose of exchanging information and eliciting action
necessary for the successful conduct of an existing contractual relationship such as
the drawing up or exchange of documents, negotiations over the terms of the con-
tract (price, terms of delivery, etc.). 'Other letters' in the 'conflict' category deal
with the exchange of information concerning a point of conflict between two par-
ties to a contract, or a conflict with a third party. Letters are typically concerned
with the exchange of information and elicitation of action necessary either to bring
an unsuccessful business relationship on the right course again (e.g. requests for
explanations, comments, action) or to terminate it altogether (notices that legal pro-
ceedings have begun, notices of termination of contract or dismissal of personnel,
etc.).

3. Methods

3.1. A dynamic perspective

The analysis of the business letters is based on a modified version of Brown and
Levinson's analytical categories and formula for calculating the weightiness of face-
threatening acts on the basis of the following variables: distance (D), power (P) and
ranking of the imposition (R) of the face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson,
1987: 76). The distance is determined by the socio-temporal and socio-spatial nature
of the contact (new or established contact), its intimacy (formal or informal), and the
character of previous contacts (letter, phone, personal) between sender and receiver
of letters, among others. The weight of the D-parameter declines during a typical,
successfully conducted course of business, but a distinction must be made between a
new and an established business relationship. In general, the newer the relationship,
the greater the scope for reducing distance. In new business relationships, the dis-
tance typically shows an initial, steep fall, reaching a plateau where it remains virtu-
ally constant during the rest of the relationship. In long-standing business relation-
ships, the distance is lower from the outset, but a certain distance always persists.
The power variable changes as a function of the business course. When the parties
are 'making contact', the receiver decides whether to respond to the letter or not and
is hence in power. Though in principle, the receiver of a letter need not respond to
letters aimed at 'making contact', and, indeed, is not conventionally expected to do
so unless he has a genuine interest in the matter of the letter, a distinction must be
made between letters sent by sellers (sales letters) and letters sent by buyers
(inquiries). Convention only expects a buyer to respond to sales letters if he is inter-
ested in purchasing the product or service offered for sale, whereas a seller will be
expected to respond to inquiries because he has a genuine interest in selling his prod-
ucts or services.

During negotiation of a contract, power may lie with either the sender or the
receiver depending on the nature of transaction and the market (buyer’s or seller’s
market) and on who needs the deal more in each particular situation. In a contract,
the parties are bound by mutual rights and obligations and they enjoy a common
interest in continuing the business relationship. The P-dimension is therefore sym-
metrical: for example, the seller's right to payment is balanced against the buyer's obligation to pay on the terms agreed.

If the parties move into the conflict phase, the P-dimension becomes asymmetrical: either party has a claim on the other and the party who makes the claim is in power (+P).

The imposition is ranked by the degree to which the request interferes with the rules and norms of business convention which are governed by custom outside a contract and by law when the parties are in a contract. The imposition's weight therefore reflects whether the parties are 'making contact', are 'negotiating', or are 'in conflict', and correlates with the sender's power status at the point in question. In short, the imposition varies with the nature of the request and, as shown in Fig. 2, as a function of the dynamics of the interaction.

![Figure 2](image)

3.2. A sequential perspective

The analysis has a text focus taking into account the text-sequential realization of politeness strategies, because it is assumed that there is a relationship between the degree of imposition of the face-threatening act performed in the propositional section and the strategies that appear outside the propositional section. At the text level,

![Figure 3](image)
the business letter is therefore divided into three sections, as illustrated in Fig. 3: (1) The opening section contains the salutation, the opening lines of the letter, and secondary illocutionary as well as propositional elements which locate the letter in a discourse-dynamic perspective and pave the way for subsequent requests. Politeness strategies recorded in the opening section are external to the face-threatening act of requesting and are hence dubbed 'external strategies'. (2) The propositional section is the central part of the letter. It contains the primary propositions of the text and the central communicative aims and the core of the illocutionary program. The communicative aim and the illocutionary program are either explicitly expressed or can be inferred from secondary illocutionary and propositional elements (Brandt and Rosengren, 1992: 28). An analysis of the propositional content of requests in this section determines which category and which type the letter belongs to. Politeness strategies in the propositional section are central or internal to the face-threatening element of requesting and are hence termed 'internal strategies'. (3) Finally, the closing section contains elements external or secondary to the illocutionary and propositional program of the text. Politeness strategies in this section are considered external to the face-threatening aspects of the letter and are therefore also termed 'external strategies'.

Each of the three sections of the letter may be described in much greater detail. They may vary extensively in length and may even be missing altogether. For the sake of illustration, an outline of possible and likely elements in the opening section is given on the assumption that this will illustrate the point. An opening section may identify sender and/or receiver by stating the sender’s address and the receiver’s address. It will fix the text in a dynamic perspective via reference to previous correspondence, it may make reference to the proposition of the text via the subject title, and clues to the sender-receiver relationship will be provided in the salutation, the possible use of courtesy titles, attention lines, etc. This section will often also contain a number of propositional forerunners, i.e. information only indirectly linked to the main message put forward in the propositional section.

3.3. Politeness strategies

The present article only focuses on negative and positive politeness which are seen as functionally different, yet supportive strategies.

Positive politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 101ff.) are divided into three types of strategies. For the present purpose, they have been semantically transcribed as ‘claim common ground’, ‘focus on cooperation’, and ‘fulfill receiver’s wants’. They may be further subdivided into specific groups of strategies, each of which finds a variety of verbal realizations as illustrated in Table I.

Each positive politeness strategy has a large, but finite set of likely verbal realizations and the above list does not pretend to include all possible ways of noticing or attending to a receiver’s interests, wants, or needs. The positive politeness strategies are not necessarily redressive of face wants that are directly linked to the face-threatening speech acts (FTA’s). They serve the wider purpose of building and maintaining a friendly, cooperative business atmosphere.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1: POSITIVE POLITENESS STRATEGIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claim common ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claim common ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notice, attend to receiver</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notice, attend to receiver**

- thank you for + -ing
- thank you for + noun
- I/we thank you for + noun
- I/we must thank you for + noun
- I/we have pleasure in + -ing
- I/we am/are pleased to + infinitive
- I/we am/are glad to + infinitive
- I/we thank you for ... and have pleasure in + -ing
- I/we thank you for ... and have much pleasure in + -ing
### TABLE II: NEGATIVE POLITENESS STRATEGIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Give freedom of action</th>
<th>Minimize imposition</th>
<th>Dissociate S/R from act</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Give freedom of action</th>
<th>Be conventionally indirect</th>
<th>Ask whether R can or will</th>
<th>Do not assume that R can/will act</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Be conventionally indirect</th>
<th>Sender-based</th>
<th>Receiver-oriented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 should</td>
<td>Receiver's ability</td>
<td>Receiver's willingness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you</td>
<td>Would you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Negative politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 129ff.) have a narrower scope and operate in relation to the central FTA on the sentence level. For the present purpose, negative politeness strategies are categorized as three broad groups. Semantically transcribed the three overall strategies are ‘give freedom of action’, ‘minimize imposition’ and ‘dissociate S/R from act’. Some of Brown and Levinson’s categories have hence been left out (e.g. ‘be direct’) and others have been combined (e.g. ‘be conventionally indirect’, ‘question/hedge’ and ‘be pessimistic’ into one (‘give freedom of action’). Each negative politeness strategy in principle has an infinite, but in practice a limited, number of verbal realizations. (See Table II.)

The notion ‘indirect’ in connection with requests has given rise to some confusion. While for some authors (e.g. Haverkate, 1984) the notion is restricted to structures which have been termed ‘hinting strategies’ (or ‘inferred requests’), it is still widely used to refer to illocutions involving preparatory conditions. ‘Indirect’ is therefore here used to refer to illocutions involving preparatory conditions, i.e. supporting moves by external modifications in Faerch and Kasper’s terminology (Faerch and Kasper, 1989; House and Kasper, 1987). In the letters analyzed such moves may be either sender-based or receiver-oriented. Moves alluding to receiver-based preparatory conditions (willingness or ability) are evidently transparent, but by questioning the receiver’s ability/willingness to perform, the requester has already shown that he/she does not take compliance for granted. The non-compliant receiver is allowed the option of politely refusing by stating that the condition in question, or some other condition, is not fulfilled. A supporting move sentence stating the preparatory condition with modalized can (If we can ...) is conventionally perceived as less polite than the form using could (If we could ...).

An example randomly taken from the corpus will illustrate how the strategies are coded and how they operate. The letter in Fig. 4 is a business letter of the type ‘order’. The opening section (the first paragraph) contains the salutation (Dear), which is not recorded as a politeness strategy, and some background information which serves the purpose of fixing the text in a dynamic perspective and paving the way for the subsequent requests in the propositional section. The opening section only has a single positive politeness strategy: (1) ‘focus on cooperation’ which includes sender and receiver in the activity by the personal pronoun our. The strategy is external to the FTA.

The propositional section (the middle paragraph) explicitly expresses the requests. The strategies, which are all negative, cover all three negative politeness strategies. The receiver’s ‘freedom of action’ is stressed by ‘conventional indirectness’, which in two cases is ‘receiver-oriented’ (8: could you; 9: should) and in one case ‘sender-based’ (5: we may). The sender also underlines the receiver’s ‘freedom of action’ by not taking his actions for granted (3: perhaps). To ‘minimize the imposition’, the sender resorts to the conventional politeness marker please (2, 6). ‘Dissociation from the face-threatening act’ is achieved by stating the reason for doing the FTA (4: so) and by impersonalizing sender and receiver with nominalization (7: delivery availability) and passive construction (10: be supplied).

In this case, the closing section only contains the salutation. Salutations are not recorded. The brevity of the post-propositional section of the order is not atypical.
Dear

Further to our\textsuperscript{1} telephone conversation today I finally managed to speak to your colleagues in Cheltenham who assured me that, with a suitable switch the Desk Top Publishing Package can be configured as a milking machine and that, with Microsoft Word, can also search and replace ASCII coding.

Accordingly, and on this basis, please\textsuperscript{2} regard this letter as our official order for one Desk Top Publishing Package, at £7,495, excluding VAT. Perhaps\textsuperscript{3} you will let me have your invoice so that\textsuperscript{4} we may\textsuperscript{5} complete the necessary paperwork. At the same time please\textsuperscript{6} indicate delivery availability\textsuperscript{7}. Could you\textsuperscript{8} also note that the upgrade software, version 1.2, should\textsuperscript{9} be supplied\textsuperscript{10}.

Yours sincerely,

The negotiation phase is characterized by relatively short opening sections and ultrashort closing sections and a corresponding scarcity of politeness strategies in either section.

4. Results

4.1. Positive and negative politeness

The percentage distribution of positive versus negative strategies varies as a function of the discourse dynamic perspective. The relative amount of positive politeness drops while that of negative politeness increases during the course of business as illustrated in Table III. There is a fairly even distribution of negative (53.5\%) and positive (46.5\%) strategies in letters aimed at ‘making contact’. The picture is slightly more skewed in the second category, ‘negotiating’, where the need for positive face redress is smaller (41.2\%) than when the parties are ‘making contact’ (46.5\%) and, correspondingly, we find a higher proportion of negative politeness strategies. In letters where the parties are ‘in conflict’, negative politeness accounts for almost three fourths (74.4\%) of the total number of strategies recorded. The amount of positive face redress is smaller (25.6\%).
Global face-considerations served by positive politeness strategies play a greater role in early contacts than later on, so positive politeness may be seen as an important instrument for establishing a productive business atmosphere; an instrument that becomes largely superfluous once contact is established and the parties are bound (in a contract) by mutual rights and obligations. The declining importance of positive politeness is also reflected in the length of the opening and closing sections of the letters, which are much shorter during negotiation and conflict than while contact is being established. Negative politeness becomes more important as the business relationship evolves and mutual interdependence is established, and it relegates positive politeness to a peripheral position if the business relationship escalates into conflict.

The need for face redress/support is associated with sender status as shown in Table IV. Table IV does not include the results obtained for ‘other letters’ from the three categories. In business letters sent by a seller, i.e. sales letters, quotations and reminders, we see a markedly larger overall percentage share of positive strategies than in the letters sent by buyers, which in this material are inquiries, orders, and complaints. This testifies to the skewed power relationship in the early stages of business contact.

Moreover, sellers not only use more positive politeness strategies than buyers, the relative weight they give to positive politeness more closely mirrors the overall trend than the buyers’ verbal behavior. Thus, where buyers maintain a fairly constant distribution of positive versus negative strategies (roughly 1:3) throughout their communication, early stage contact is characterized by far more positive than negative politeness in letters sent by sellers. This picture shifts during the course of business, and there is less difference between sellers and buyers when they are ‘in conflict’.

4.2. Text-position of positive and negative politeness

The sequential distribution of politeness strategies on the text level is monitored in accordance with the division of the letters into sections. Strategies appearing in the propositional section, i.e. in sentences where requests are uttered, are termed (request-) ‘internal’ politeness strategies as described in section 3.2 above. Strategies outside the propositional section are termed (request-) ‘external’ politeness strategies. The text-sequential distribution of the strategies underlines their fundamentally different nature. The positive strategies, operating on the text’s macro-level, serve contextual aspects of face and hence dominate in the external position except in ‘orders’ and ‘in conflict’. The negative politeness strategies are linked more specifically to the face-threatening act and tend to appear within the sentences where requests are made, except in ‘other letters’ aimed at ‘making contact’ and in quotations. (See Table V.)

Strategies are summated horizontally as either positive or negative strategies. For example, in the 25 sales letters, 72.9% of all the positive strategies recorded were found in the external position, i.e. in the opening or closing sections, whereas only 27.1% were found in sentences where requests were made, i.e. in the propositional section.
### TABLE III: POLITENESS AND TEXT CATEGORY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive strategies</th>
<th>Negative strategies</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making contact</td>
<td>46.5%</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In conflict</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE IV: POLITENESS AND LETTER TYPE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter type</th>
<th>Positive strategies</th>
<th>Negative strategies</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sales letters</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiries</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotations</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orders</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminders</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaints</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>78.0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Seen in a discourse-dynamic perspective, the positive strategies move from the periphery to the center of the letter. So the argument that positive politeness should serve global contextual face-considerations holds true more for letters in the early stages of business contact than at later stages, where the positive strategies exercise a role more directly related to the face-threatening requests. Negative politeness strategies mainly appear within request sentences.

Broken down according to sender status, we observe important differences in the relative distribution of internal versus external positive and negative strategies. Both sellers and buyers ‘making contact’, reserve the negative politeness strategies for the propositional section (sales letters 72% vs. inquiries 66.2%) and the positive strategies for the non-propositional sections (sales letters 72.9% vs. inquiries 86.2%). This picture shifts when the parties are negotiating. Where sellers making quotations use a greater proportion of positive strategies in the proposition-external position than in the internal position (56.5% vs. 43.5%), though less so than in sales letters (72.9% vs. 27.1%), buyers issuing orders use more positive strategies within than outside the propositional section (62.5% vs. 37.5%). The difference in the use of negative strategies is even more pronounced. Sellers use negative strategies both within the propositional section and in the text-peripheral sections (58.3% vs. 41.7%), but buyers almost exclusively use negative strategies in the propositional section (96.8%). ‘In conflict’, sellers reserve the negative strategies for the internal position to a greater extent than buyers (reminders 96.8% vs. complaints 75.9%), and they back these negative strategies with positive strategies within those sentences where requestive speech acts are made more often than in the case of buyers (reminders 72% vs. complaints 60.6%). The sequential distribution of politeness strategies is therefore not merely a function of the course of business, it is also intimately linked to roles assumed by the parties.

4.3. Letter-specific text-distribution of politeness categories

The positive and negative politeness categories were distributed as shown in Table VI. Strategies are summated horizontally as either external or internal positive or negative strategies. For example, positive politeness strategies in sales letters in the external position, i.e. in the opening and closing sections of the letter, ‘claim common ground’ in 41.9%, ‘focus on cooperation’ in another 50% and only seek to ‘fulfill R’s wants’ in 8.1% of the sales letters examined. Table VI makes it possible to compare and contrast the text-sequential percentage distribution of specific politeness categories. Thus, in sales letters ‘focus on cooperation’ and ‘claim common ground’ may be seen to compete in the external position, but ‘focus on cooperation’ is by far the most frequent internal positive politeness strategy as it accounts for 86.9% of all the positive strategies used in requesting sentences in sales letters.

The general picture is that in the opening and closing sections of their letters, sellers ‘claim common ground’ (sales letters 41.9%, quotations 44.6%, reminders 60.0%) to a greater extent than buyers (inquiries 33.9%, orders 33.3%, complaints 25.0). Inversely, buyers ‘focus on cooperation’ (inquiries 58.9%, orders 66.7%, complaints 75%) to a greater extent than sellers (sales letters 50.0%, quotations 52.5%,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Letter type</th>
<th>Positive politeness strategies</th>
<th>Negative politeness strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;External&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Internal&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making contact</td>
<td>Sales letters</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inquiries</td>
<td>86.2%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other letters</td>
<td>97.7%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating</td>
<td>Quotations</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orders</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other letters</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In conflict</td>
<td>Reminders</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
<td>72.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complaints</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other letters</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>76.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE VII: TEXT-POSITION OF POLITENESS CATEGORIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter type</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Chaim common ground</th>
<th>Focus on cooperation</th>
<th>Fulfil R's wants</th>
<th>Give freedom of action</th>
<th>Minimize imposition</th>
<th>Avoid S/R from act</th>
<th>Disseminate</th>
<th>Interact</th>
<th>Ext</th>
<th>Int</th>
<th>Ext</th>
<th>Int</th>
<th>Ext</th>
<th>Int</th>
<th>Ext</th>
<th>Int</th>
<th>Ext</th>
<th>Int</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SAL</td>
<td>Making contact</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>36.3</td>
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Figures are given in percentage. Abbreviation: SAL sales letter, INQ inquiry, OTL other letters, QIO quotation, ORD order, REM reminder, COM complaint, Ext external position, Int internal position.
reminders 40.0%). The strategy ‘fulfill R’s wants’ is poorly represented in the external position in all letters. ‘Focus on cooperation’ is the most frequently deployed positive politeness strategy in the request-internal position. It is the strategy of choice in the internal position except in complaints and ‘other letters’ where the parties are ‘in conflict’. The picture is less clear for the negative politeness strategies. Sellers tend to ‘give’ more ‘freedom of action’ in the opening and closing sections of their letters (sales letters 57.1%, reminders 50.0%) than buyers (inquiries 42.0%, complaints 7%) except in the negotiation phase (quotations 32.1%, orders 100%). Within request sentences, sellers tend to ‘dissociate’ themselves or the receiver more ‘from the act’ (sales letters 40.6%, quotations 43.6%, reminders 54.8%) than buyers (inquiries 36.3%, orders 6.7%, complaints 47.7%). A more detailed study comparing and discussing strategy categories and their combinations is in preparation.

4.4. Strategy combinatorics – An example

In the 25 quotations analyzed and presented in the present paper, the positive verbal strategy most frequently adopted in the opening section is to ‘claim common ground’ (quotation, external position 44.6%) by attending to the receiver’s want to be appreciated for having made an inquiry and thus signalled his willingness to consider entering into a commercial relationship. Notice or attention to the receiver is typically expressed verbally as described in section 3.3 above. The number of verbal strategies employed to redress the face-threatening act of making a quotation is relatively sparse, which testifies to the relatively moderate weight of the imposition conventionally associated with quotations. A quotation is commonly stated as a simple fact concerning the seller’s ability to quote, with or without a positive strategy that expresses appreciation. In the last part of the propositional section in quotations, the most frequent negative strategies have as a common denominator that they dissociate the sender/receiver from the face-threatening act (quotations, internal strategies 43.6%, Table VI) by means of impersonal verbs, nominalizations, or other syntactical means. We often find a series of negative strategies where the seller invites negotiation of the terms of the contract or appeals to the buyer to seek extra information. As shown in the examples below, which have all been drawn from the quotations analyzed, the sender typically grants the receiver ‘freedom of action’ by hedging with if (1a–g). The conditional if sequence may either begin (1a–c) or end (1d–g) the sentence. The sender also typically ‘dissociates the sender or the receiver from the act’ by means of impersonal constructions, pronominal/referential or other means which typically remove the receiver (1a: be satisfactory (to you), 1b: of assistance (to you)) or the sender (1g: advise (us/me)) from the surface of the sentence. The conditional if sentence is almost always backed by a conventional politeness marker (please) (1a–g):

(1a) If this arrangement will not be satisfactory, please let us know
(1b) If I can be of further assistance, please contact me at the Nottingham office
(1c) If anything is unclear, please contact me
(1d) Please contact us if you have any queries
(1f) Please contact me if you require any further information

(1g) Enclosed is an up-to-date Schedule, please read through and advise if any amendments are required

Alternatively, we may see the use of supporting modalized moves concerning the sender’s ability (2a), using can or as in (2b–d) using could or would, which may be either sender-based (2b) or receiver-oriented (2c–d):

(2a) If we can be of any assistance to you please contact us
(2b) If we could be of further assistance to you please call or write
(2c) If you would like to investigate matters further, and since time is short, kindly return this letter or let me have a note with the details indicated below; or telephone me.
(2d) If you would like to take advantage of our service, please contact us at the above address

We may also see this combination of strategies supported by one or more positive strategies typically either ‘giving gifts to receiver’ or ‘attending to his wants’:

(3) If you are planning to purchase a microcomputer and or Software Packages and would like a very competitive quotation, or more details about our products and services, or free advice on your likely needs, then please contact me

The verbal strategies in the closing section clearly reflect the fact that a business relationship is about to be established. Focus is partly on the common interest the parties to the contract will enjoy, partly on aspects of their potential, future cooperation. The sender typically stresses his intention to cater to the potential buyer’s needs by ‘claiming common ground’, possibly intensified by an uptoner or exaggeration:

(4a) Assuring you of our best attention
(4b) Assuring you of our best attention at all times
(4c) Assuring you of our very best attention at all times

This strategy may be coupled with an expression of appreciation of the receiver, appealing to his positive face wants in various ways:

(5) Thanking you for your valued custom and assuring you of my best attention at all times I remain

Strategies that ‘focus on cooperation’ also abound and are more frequent in the closing section than strategies that ‘claim common ground’. They typically express optimism about a future business relationship and/or presuppose the potential buyer’s positive reaction to the quotation:

(6a) I look forward to hearing from you
(6b) We look forward to hearing from you, and hope it may be possible to do business
(6c) We hope these details will be found of interest and that we can look forward to being of service to you in due course.
(6d) We trust that this quotation is of interest to you and hope that this will develop into a good business relationship. Assuring you of our best attention

Such positive strategies also in some cases combine with negative strategies, typically sender-based conventional indirectness:

(7) We would be happy to serve your printing and publishing needs

5. Discussion

The role of verbal politeness in written texts has so far only received scant attention. While at one and the same time an extension and a limitation, application of Brown and Levinson’s model to written language provides an interesting opportunity for testing the model. In written texts, the linguistic expressions of politeness are not only the primary vehicles of politeness, they are the only ones. Deprived of the wealth of prosodic and non-verbal features, which add important supplementary aspects to politeness (Arndt and Janney, 1987, 1991; Bald, 1979), the sender of a written message has recourse to verbal means of politeness only. All the politeness a sender wishes to communicate must therefore be put into the verbal means brought to the task. Furthermore, as written texts are not as elusive as spoken words, and as the parties are separated physically and temporally, it is anticipated that greater care is spent on adapting the text to its illocutionary purpose in written than in oral communication and that the deployment of politeness strategies therefore more truly reflects strategic considerations in written than in oral communication. This anticipation is particularly relevant where the verbal strategies are guided more by the necessities of institutionalized roles defined by the extra-linguistic context than by idiosyncrasies, not least in times where corporate planners are becoming increasingly aware of the need to manage their communication flow and fine-tune their communication to meet the needs of an increasingly competitive business environment. This is particularly true for market communication, which is one of the central media through which a company realizes its strategic aims. For these aims to be reached satisfactorily, the inter-personal relationship between the company and the parties with which it trades must be managed in a way that reflects or supports economic and commercial priorities. In principle, market communication is therefore maximally adapted to the medium and the particular situation in which it occurs and verbal politeness becomes an important ‘strategic’ tool. Still, written market communication remains a virtually uninvestigated area of pragmatic research and internationally reported studies of politeness in written business discourse are scarce (Hagge and Kostelnick, 1989; Larson, 1988; Marier, 1992; Pilegaard, 1990). However, a number of interesting studies of politeness in business discourse have been
conducted that have not been published internationally (Hansen, 1989; Hermann, 1990; Pilegaard, 1990b).

In the present article, the traditional speaker-oriented, sentence-based approach to the study of linguistic politeness has been abandoned in favor of a more holistic approach that sees politeness as pragmatic manifestations which operate on the text level. Strategies form a complex web that cuts across sentence boundaries (as also noted by Fraser, 1990, 1983; Fraser and Nolen, 1981), and the nature, form, and distribution of politeness vary across the text according to the situation. This coupling of situationality and intertextuality (Beaugrande and Dressier, 1981: 182ff.) within the conceptual framework provided by Brown and Levinson invites additional insights into the norms that govern verbal behavior in business communication because it makes it possible to compare strategy combination patterns in different types of letters.

In business letters, positive and negative politeness are equally frequent in the early stages of business contact (Table III) but once negotiation has started, negative politeness dominates. The reason is twofold. Firstly, the socio-spatial distance between the parties is reduced the more contact they have had, because the need for positive politeness as a 'social accelerator' is replaced by bonds of mutual rights and obligations once the parties have entered into a contract. The more clear-cut the power (P) relationship, the less the need for positive facework. Secondly, the Gricean maxims of clarity and brevity are strongly abided by in business letters, which tend to get to the point very quickly as soon as the necessary level of intimacy has been reached. In business letters, the relationship between the level of positive politeness and distance would therefore seem to be very different from what is seen in oral face-to-face interaction. The decline in the relative frequency of positive politeness as a function of the progression of the course of business is also reflected in the length of the opening and closing sections which are shorter when the parties are 'negotiating' or are 'in conflict' than when they are 'making contact'. However, the distribution of negative versus positive politeness is also related to the letter sender's status as seller or buyer. The relative amount of positive facework undertaken by sellers far exceeds that brought to the task by buyers, in particular in the first category of business contacts (Table IV), which testifies to the fact that the buyer is in the +P position. The overall distribution of positive versus negative politeness and the letter-specific distribution according to sender status confirm the basic purpose of positive politeness as an instrument with which commonality, intimacy, and togetherness are established.

In business letters, politeness strategies are used to (1) prepare the ground for the formulation of the letter's main request, (2) redress the face-threatening act of requesting, and (3) round off the letter. Application of the text-sequential perspective shows that negative politeness is mainly request-internal (Table V): it is the principal means of face-redressive verbal behavior. However, it is not exclusively used in the request-internal position as defined here. It is also used outside the propositional section, notably by sellers in the negotiation phase. It operates on the text level in the opening section, where it serves the purpose of preparing the ground for the face-threatening request by creating an overall atmosphere of non-imposition, and in the
closing section, where that atmosphere is reinforced, typically by means of supportive moves. Positive politeness serves a broader purpose. Retaining its role as a mainly global face tool in the early stages of business contact, irrespective of sender status, it is used more abundantly within sentences where face-threatening acts are made than outside such sentences, when the parties enter the conflict stage. We may conclude that there is no exclusive text position for either politeness category and no 'typical' text position for positive politeness in business letters. The distribution of politeness strategies in general, and positive strategies in particular, is subject to extra-linguistic or situational constraints.

The monitoring of politeness in a text-sequential perspective makes it possible to give fairly accurate semantic descriptions of the strategic layout of different business letters. For example, sales letters use a varied repertoire of negative strategies in the propositional section and almost always combine these strategies with positive strategies that 'focus on cooperation'. However, they clearly prefer negative strategies that grant the receiver 'freedom of action' (about 60% of all negative external strategies) in the non-propositional sections where the use of positive politeness strategies is more varied. This profile of the typical sales letter can be compared and contrasted both with other types of letters sent by the seller, so as to establish how the choice of strategies changes during the course of business, and with letters at the same stage in the course of business sent by buyers, so as to demonstrate how the role-relationship affects strategic verbal behavior.

Each of the six strategy categories may be further subdivided into specific strategies, each with a finite set of likely verbal realizations. Following such subdivision, more detailed studies will make it possible to compare and contrast typical strategies and strategy combinations across texts located in a dynamic business discourse perspective. Thus, preliminary studies have shown that at the stage where business partners are 'making contact', both sales letters and inquiries contain sender-based supportive moves in the opening sections. In the request-internal position, receiver-oriented conventional indirectness is by far the most frequent negative strategy in sales letters. In inquiries, the conventional indirectness is, however, mainly sender-based. The additive effect of such small differences may be significant, and may shape the overall politeness level of a text. However, for these observations to gain sufficient statistical credibility, it is necessary to analyze a larger number of texts than presented here. Such analyses will also be able to elucidate the extent to which the nature of the request determines the strategy combinations outside the propositional section of the letter. These analyses are currently ongoing.

A description of the individual types of business letters along the line presented above may provide the basis for comparative intercultural studies describing how cultural politeness prerogatives translate differentially into verbal behavior. Such knowledge is potentially crucial to the success of the conduct of business contacts, the handling of negotiation-processes, and the management of conflicts. It may also be an approach that could add interesting dimensions to studies of cultural differences in rhetorical strategies (Abelen et al., 1993).

Theoretically, the thrust of this paper lies in the coupling of situationality and intertextuality within the conceptual framework provided by Brown and Levinson.
Politeness theory applied in this way may shift attention from the static rules and norms of oral communication in this community to an analysis of the dynamics of its interactionary patterns in written communication; an approach which is particularly productive in cross-cultural communication where communicative failure may be related to differences in usage which preserve the semantic meaning at the expense of pragmatic intent.

References


