

Politeness Theory and Computer-Mediated Communication: A Sociolinguistic Approach to Analyzing Relational Messages

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Abstract

This conceptual paper suggests how Politeness Theory [6] – well known in anthropological and linguistic literatures – can contribute to the study of role relations in computer-mediated communication. Politeness, phrasing things so as to show respect and esteem for the face of others, occurs throughout social interchange. The paper reviews politeness theory and enumerates specific linguistic indices of politeness. It then discusses how recognition of the central role of face-work in social interchange can enhance understanding of why and where emotion-work might occur in CMC, how such emotion-work (in the form of politeness) can be reliably observed and quantitatively measured at a linguistic level of analysis, and how the distribution of politeness phenomena is systematically related to variables of interest in CMC research – such as status, cohesion, impersonality, friendship, and communicative efficiency.

1. Introduction

This conceptual article draws upon the sociolinguistic and anthropological theory of politeness [6], suggesting how this theory and its considerable body of empirical findings might usefully inform research on computer-mediated communication (CMC). Politeness can contribute to CMC in two general ways.

For one, CMC research lies at the intersection of several disciplines – including computer science, systems science, organizational theory, and social

psychology. Yet for the study of what is essentially a social psychology of communication, research has paid scant attention to research and theory in the fields of linguistics and sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics is expressly concerned with how language varies as a function of social roles and variables, and with how specific linguistic elements function to convey relational meaning. Language is even more basic in computer-mediated environments given their narrower bandwidth. Thus, in drawing on politeness theory this paper hopes to provide CMC researchers an intriguing glimpse into how one prominent and emerging area of linguistic research can be applied to the study of CMC.

A second general contribution of politeness to the study of CMC emanates from the dramaturgical framework [23] politeness uses to analyze relational communication. An implicit assumption of much literature that has studied socio-emotional aspects of CMC is that humans possess strong social, affiliative needs. But the literature tends to take these social needs for granted, focusing instead upon how communication environments affect certain outcome variables. Yet the model of human interaction elaborated by politeness theory [20-22], by directing our attention to the central role of face in social interchange, provides a novel yet grounded framework that offers fresh insights into the emotional and interpersonal dynamics undergirding group processes – dynamics that occur in both electronic and face-to-face contexts.

2. Politeness theory

Politeness encompasses more than the mannered etiquette of Emily Post [40]. The theory [6] -- well known in anthropology, sociolinguistics, and linguistics (for reviews:[8, 11, 18, 30]) -- is rooted in the dramaturgical theories of Erving Goffman [20-22], particularly relative to the central role of face in interaction. Dramaturgy simply references Goffman's conception of individuals as social 'actors' who concertedly 'perform' (present a public self) on the stage of everyday life. Individuals use linguistic, behavioral, and gestural displays to present a positive self-image ("face") to the social world; they seek to create certain impressions in others, to appear smooth and competent in their role performances, to be perceived as appropriately heedful and supportive of others' performances, and so forth. Face, the positive social value each person effectively claims for him or her self in the public arena [20], is proffered and thus exposed throughout interaction. Face is the very reflection of self worth; upon this presentational aspect hangs individuals' self-esteem, self-identity, and their credibility as a member of the social group. "There is nothing routine about face to face interaction, exposure of face to possible undermining by others, and its treatment by others, is a hallowed event" [4:87].

While Goffman highlights individuals' presentational work designed to bolster and maintain their own face, politeness emphasizes interactional "support work" destined toward others' face. That is, all individuals have face, but also "face wants" -- the desire and expectation that others who surround them in interaction will work to affirm and preserve their public persona. In essence, politeness means "phrasing things in such a way as to take into consideration the feelings of others" [11].

2.1. Locating politeness in everyday speech

While face is exposed throughout interaction, there exists a set of common interactional events -- here termed "face-threatening-acts" (FTA's) -- during which support-work is particularly critical, hence most readily observed. FTA's include acts of criticizing, disagreeing, interrupting, imposing, asking a favor, requesting information or goods, embarrassing, bumping into, and so forth. A simple request for information -- as for the time -- threatens face; the requestor has presumed some right of access to the hearer's time, energy, and attention. When "performing" (phrasing) FTA's, speakers (in CMC: "senders") commonly draw upon linguistic politeness routines so as to defray or mitigate the face threatening aspect. Phrasings such as: "Would you be able to tell me the time?" or "Excuse me, do you have the time?" typify verbal interchange. Rather than "Give me the

figures," one hears (CMC: "sees") the more amenable: "Hey, when you get a chance, I'd like the opportunity to look over those figures." More than interactional gloss, these verbal forms are central to managing the uncertainties of social interface. Figure 1 models options ("strategies") available to actors faced with performing a speech act they deem face threatening.

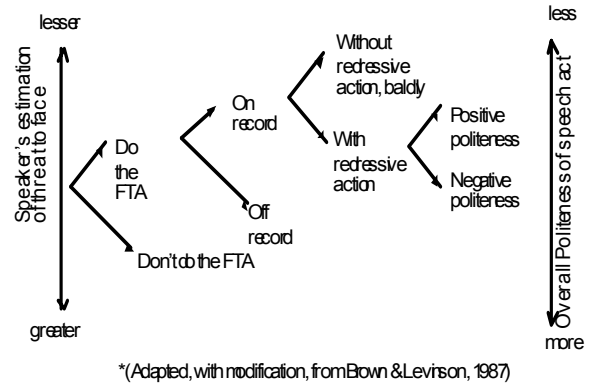


Figure 1
Flowchart of politeness strategies ordered against estimated threat to face*

2.2. Do not perform the FTA

Here speakers entirely avoid performing the FTA, perfectly avoiding threat to another's face. One mustering up courage to request a raise from the boss (an impingement upon boss's desire for autonomy and self-determination) may forgo the request. As Figure 1 indicates, actors choose this strategy when they estimate the threat to another's face to be quite high.

2.3. Go off-record

Should an actor decide to perform the FTA, they may go "off-record" -- being so ambiguous that more than one clear intention is attributable -- one of which attributions poses no threat. One interested in copying another's computer software may say: "That's a great program, I've was going to get one, but it's so expensive." The receiver cannot know with certainty that a hint has been broached; the sender can credibly claim an alternate interpretation.

2.4. Go on-record, baldly

To go "on-record" entails phrasing the FTA such that the sender's intentions are unambiguous. To do so "baldly" entails phrasing it in direct, blunt terms with no attempt to soften the face-threatening thrust. This is often seen in the imperative form: "Get me those figures," "Go away"; it may also include aggravating, threat-escalating clauses: "Don't just stand there, I want that report, now" [5, 29].

2.5. Go on-record with redressive action

Here a sender unambiguously performs a speech act while also employing redressive language so as to moderate its force. This is the most common and linguistically diverse strategy. Senders draw on an array of linguistic devices -- "negative" and "positive" politeness "tactics." These 2 categories derive from the fact that face wants possess two basic aspects -- "positive face" and "negative face." Positive face references every individual's basic desire for their public self-image to be shown engagement, ratification, appreciation from others -- the want to be wanted. But just as individuals desire affirmation and esteem, they also desire a degree of autonomy and self-determination. "Negative face" represents the want of every actor that his or her person be unimpeded -- the desire for freedom from impingement.

Positive politeness tactics thus address or invoke others' positive face wants, palliating through the demonstration of esteem. Negatively polite constructions contend with negative face, by demonstrating distance and circumspection.

2.6. Specific negative tactics

Conventionally indirect speech acts (Table 1, tactic #1), taken literally simply inquire into "preconditions" (necessary but insufficient conditions for speech acts to succeed) [2]. "Do you know what time it is?" could beget "Yes, I do," for grammatically it queries one's knowledge (a precondition). Yet by virtue of common usage we understand this to encode a direct request; it thus broaches intent, but indirectly. Other examples include inquiries into hearer's possession ("Do you have the time?"), ability ("Can you tell me what time it is?"), and so forth [15]. By using hedges (#2) speakers avoid committing themselves to the intent of their own speech act ("I wonder if I could perhaps/maybe/possibly ask you . . .").

The subjunctive (#3), the syntactical form used to express doubt, defrays threat by placing conditionality upon the hearer's compliance ("Could/would you do me a favor?"). Words or phrases that minimize an

imposition (#4: "Could I have just a few seconds . . .") signal that the intrinsic seriousness of the imposition is not great. More formal language choices (#6) function to communicate social distance and respect for the addressee. For example, compare "Would you care for a beverage" to "Would you like something to drink?"

Nominalization (#8; changing verbs and adverbs into nouns or adjectives), removes actors from a sense of feeling or doing things, giving their speech acts less active force [6]. Compare "I want you", to "You are wanted", or "I expect that . . ." to "It is expected that . . .". Finally, use of the past tense (#9) when the speaking in the present ("I was/had been wondering if I could . . .") moves sender's intent "as if" into the past, by extension the infringement into the conditional future [16].

TABLE 1
Tactics of Negative Politeness*

| Tactic | Example |
|--|--|
| 1. Be conventionally indirect; inquire into the hearer's ability or willingness to comply. | "Can you tell me what time it is?" |
| 2. Use hedges: words or phrases that diminish the force of a speech act. | "Can I <u>perhaps/possibly</u> trouble you?" |
| 3. Use subjunctive to express pessimism about hearer's ability/willingness to comply. | "Could I ask you a question?" |
| 4. Use words or phrases that minimize the imposition. | "I need <u>just a little</u> of your time." |
| 5. Give deference by using honorifics: Sir, Mr., Ms., Dr. | "Can I help you, <u>Sir</u> ." |
| 6. Use formal word choices to indicate seriousness and to establish social distance. | "Could you tolerate a slight imposition on my part?" |
| 7. Apologize: admit the impingement, express reluctance. | "I <u>am sorry</u> to bother you, but..." |
| 8. Impersonalise the speaker and hearer by avoiding the pronouns "I" and "you." | "Is it possible to request a favor?" |
| 9. Use the past tense to create distance in time. | "I <u>had been wondering</u> if I could ask a favor." |
| 10. Nominalize (change verbs & adverbs into adjectives or nouns) to diminish speakers' active participation. | " <u>My asking</u> you to leave is required by regulations." |
| 11. State the FTA as a general rule. | " <u>Regulations require</u> that I ask you to leave." |

*Adapted from Brown & Levinson (1987)

2.7. Specific positive tactics

Negative tactics limit redress to the imposition itself, but positive tactics (Table 2) widens to an appreciation of the other's wants in general, or to location of commonality between speaker and hearer. Face threat is palliated through conveyance of esteem, by bringing actors into a common identity and shared sphere of concern, or by invoking underlying expectations of reciprocity among in-group members. Positive tactic #1 entails showing interest or admiration by calling attention to the hearer's qualities, possessions, interests, or wants ("Gee, that's a really great looking notebook, mind if I try it out?" "Lars, you look lovely today, by the way . . ."), thus implying the existence of common ground.

Small talk, gossip, or joking (#7) asserts or presupposes common values or viewpoints. Joking surfaces shared values in that "getting" a joke hinges upon shared background assumptions. Small talk – the weather, sports, fashion -- reflects a sender's endeavor to locate or infer a common point of view. Finally, use of inclusive forms (#9; "we" or "us" when the speaker really means "I" and "you"; "Where did we put that book?" versus "Where did you put that book?"), places sender and receiver in the same role, suggesting they share a similar outlook.

2.8. Rank ordering of positive and negative

As in Figure 1, positive tactics are less polite than negative. Positive rituals are riskier because broaching solidarity intimates an interpersonal privilege the receiver may be unwilling to grant. If the hearer does not share this claim the overture is invasive. "Excuse me, Sir, could I trouble you for some assistance on an important matter?" and "Hey, howzit goin? Hey, gimme a hand with this, willya?" transmit contrary assumptions. The negative form acknowledges an imposition and moderates its force; the positive form presupposes that due to an underlying solidarity the imposition is intrinsically less severe.

3. Applications to study of CMC

Given this brief account of politeness theory, what are its potential contributions to research on processes and outcomes of CMC?

3.1. Is politeness present in CMC?

There should be little doubt that face, FTA's, and the remedial politeness behaviors used to defray face-threat, occur with considerable frequency in computer-mediated environments. Hiemstra's [24] examination of transcripts from CMC sessions (synchronous and

asynchronous) found the great majority of messages to contain instances of face-threat, face-threat mitigated

TABLE 2
Tactics of Positive Politeness

| Tactic | Example |
|---|--|
| 1. Notice hearer's admirable qualities or possessions, show interest, exaggerate. | "Hey love your new Palm-pilot, can I borrow it sometime?" |
| 2. Employ phonological slurring to convey in-group membership. | " <u>Heya</u> , <u>gimme</u> a hand with this <u>willya</u> ?" |
| 3. Use colloquialisms or slang to convey in-group membership. | "Most are <u>damn</u> hard, but this one should be a <u>piece-of-cake</u> ." |
| 4. Use ellipsis (omission) to communicate tacit understandings. | (Do you) "Mind if I join you?" |
| 5. Use first name or in-group name to insinuate familiarity. | "Hey <u>Bud</u> , have you gotta minute?" |
| 6. Claim common view: assert knowledge of hearer's wants or that hearer has knowledge of speaker's wants. | "You know how the janitors don't like it when..." |
| 7. Seek agreement; raise or presuppose common ground/ common values; engage in small talk/ joke. | "How bout that game last night? Did the Ravens whip the pants off the Giants or what!" |
| 8. Give reasons: assert reflexivity by making activity seem reasonable to the hearer. | "I'm really late for an important appointment, so ..." |
| 9. Use inclusive forms ("we" or "lets") to include both speaker and hearer in the activity. | " <u>We're</u> not feeling well, are <u>we</u> ?" |
| 10. Assert reciprocal exchange or tit for tat. | "Do me this favor, and I'll make it up to you." |
| 11. Give something desired - gifts, sympathy, understanding. | "You look like you've had a rough week." |

through employment of linguistic politeness. FTA's are unavoidable, in CMC no less than in FtF. Common interactional events such as disagreements, criticisms, requests for information or help, giving directives, or even a simple request for clarification of a prior message – all these moves are charged with potential face threat.

Even something as prosaic as requesting a file exacts politeness, for which an array of nuanced choices is available: what happened to that file?; can you send me the file?; why don't you send me the file?; do you have the file?; don't you have the file?; will you tell me where the file is?; would you tell me where the file is?; why don't you tell me where it is?; could you let me know where the file is?; might I inquire about

the file?; do we know where the file is?; I know you're really busy, but when you find the time, do you think you could send me that file?; excuse me, but, have you seen that file?; would you perhaps be able to tell me where that file is?; hey, where the heck is that file?; the file!; I need that file, now!; have the file?; get me the damn file, or else!, and on!

Goffman observed that even technical interchange is bracketed by opening (greeting) and closing (farewell) sequences in which actors "clarify and fix the roles that the participants will take. . ." and "show participants what they may expect of one another when they next meet" [20]. Finally, consider Lee's [33] hermeneutic analysis of a series of e-mail exchanges surrounding an employee's request, simultaneously sent to a number of individuals, to participate in a training program. The request represented a breach of the interaction order (as Lee put it: was a "politically sensitive" request that "shattered protocol" p. 152).

In short, face-work need not require FtF. Interestingly, there is one FTA -- common in FtF -- that is not found in CMC: conversational interruptions. Interruptions are conversationally important; potentially dysfunctional, or indicative of dominance [52]. Yet electronic technologies beget FTA's of their own. While interruptions are absent, interpersonal *intrusions* are actually facilitated by technology. It is easier to hit the 'send' button than to walk down the hall. Lee's example above instances this; the individual violated protocol by sending the request to five individuals representing different organizational units and different hierarchical levels.

Proposition 1: The exposure of face, the commission of FTA's, and the employment of linguistic politeness routines used to redress FTA's, will occur quite frequently in CMC.

Proposition 1a: The specific form of FTA's (e.g.: interruptions, intrusions) will differ in CMC interaction.

Moreover, politeness theory, with its emphasis on language, directs our attention to the rich possibilities inherent in verbal bandwidths. By its specification of discrete linguistic indices that carry relational meaning politeness provides an empirically grounded, phenomenologically rich picture of just how words function to carry relational meaning. The tactics of politeness, as prior research indicates, can be reliably observed, and thus quantitatively measured. In compiling the tactics, Brown and Levinson [6] drew upon a large body of well-established and carefully researched linguistic and sociolinguistic findings.

Assumption 1: The specific tactics of politeness can be reliably observed and thus quantitatively measured; as such they can be used in the

assessment of relational ties within CMC, at a linguistic level of analysis.

3.2. The value of a dramaturgic view

Interaction as dramaturgy adds an important dimension to conceptualizations of socio-emotional and relational communication in CMC. The term "communication," as does any terminological choice, comes laden with its own set of tacit, underlying assumptions. Communication has a rather technical meaning -- the process of encoding meaning, transmission, and subsequent decoding by a receiver. In contrast the term "interaction," which is perhaps more often used by behavioral scientists, directs attention away from strict message content and toward the psychological and group dynamics occasioned by the interfacing (and often clash) of public personas. Indeed Goffman might have preferred "computer-mediated *interaction*."

The difference is one of emphasis; an interactionist, dramaturgic perspective underscores the fact that no matter how technical a communicative exchange may appear, such exchanges are at the same time carried out by individuals conscious of investing and thus exposing their face in the public arena. Individuals derive enormous identity validation and psychological sustenance from participating in the arena of everyday interaction. They strive to present a public self-image (face) that comports with their own internal self-image, thereby enhancing self-esteem. Individuals strongly desire that their public face be shown esteem and granted respect by others. And, individuals know they must demonstrate their ability to handle the face of other members of their social group gently, and with tact. To this end, during interaction individuals continually strive to put forth an accomplished, commendable "performance," and part of this entails phrasing things in such a way as to evoke the desired response in others -- i.e.: adeptness at politeness.

Proposition 2: Individuals in CMC modes are aware of and motivated by dramaturgical concerns (e.g.: aware of desire to appear competent, interesting, considerate to others, and of phrasing messages in such a way as to preserve relational harmony).

3.3. Reconceptualizing "socioemotional"

Media richness theory [14] and its early research findings suggested that the leanness of computer mediated environments stymied development of socio-emotional relationships, that is, of warm, friendly, collegial relationships. One implication was that perhaps CMC environments would have to be reserved

for more task-oriented work, with FtF modes necessary for bonding and solidifying socio-emotional relations. More recent work, grounded in social information processing theory [48], suggests that in real-life (as opposed to laboratory) settings, or in laboratory settings but given more time, CMC users will eventually develop conventions and understandings that enable them to establish socio-emotional communication, for example through emoticons, through greater reliance on verbal channels, and so forth [49]. This finding also pertains to what are termed “relational” ties, that is, role orientations along other dimensions -- dominance/inequality, trust, intimacy, casualness/formality [49].

Note that politeness goes against the grain of the conventional logic, whereby researchers allocate conversational acts into either task or socio-emotionally oriented moves – defined as mutually exclusive categories [3, 17, 45]. Consider the example of directives, the subject of substantial attention by politeness scholars [2, 15, 50]. Directives, any instance of using words to attempt to get another to do something, are clearly task-oriented. Yet because directives intrinsically infringe upon others’ face politeness tactics are interwoven, bound up in the commission of directives. Rice and Love [42], using Bales’ [3] scheme, categorized as “task oriented” all speech acts in which someone “asked for information.” But asking for a file (illustrated previously) certainly comprises an instance of asking for information. Thus “task” oriented behaviors often entail substantial emotion-work -- designed to appease and buffer the face of others.

Proposition 3: Even in verbal acts typically categorized as “task oriented,” emotion work in the form of politeness occurs; this politeness (how much politeness and of what type and using which specific tactics) provides important cues regarding actors’ relational orientation toward one another, or toward the group as a whole.

3.4. The emotion-work of negative politeness

The distinction between positive and negative politeness also speaks to conceptualizations of “emotion-work” [26] within the CMC literature. Conceptualizations of emotional or socioemotional communication in many ways map onto positive politeness. That is, to the demonstration and intimation of affective ties -- friendship, social attraction, solidarity, cohesion. But what of face’s other aspect, negative politeness? The communication and demonstration of social distance, circumspection, formality and impersonality (which is accomplished via negative politeness) is also a form of emotion-

work. While positive mechanisms help persons to bond and to locate common ground, negative mechanisms are essential for preventing individuals from “coming too close,” for buffering egos from the inevitable frictions and intrusions of social life.

Consider the adjectives that anchor the scale items used in measuring social presence (the feeling one has that other persons are involved in a communication exchange) [44]. Low social presence is described as impersonal, distant, unemotional, removed [12]. But these are not necessarily emotion-neutral terms. Negative politeness tactics, from the perspective of politeness theory, are integral to the establishment and communication of social distance and impersonality, and it takes a great deal of concerted emotion and linguistic work to impart these meanings [38]. The use of “nouniness,” of formal word choices, the impersonalization of pronouns, the work that goes into grammatical correctness, use of hedges, the subjunctive, and so forth (see Table 1) -- all these demand concerted linguistic work. In FtF, to display no facial emotion (e.g.: a poker face) can prove quite a difficult role performance [38].

Goffman’s concept of “virtual offense” [20] helps us appreciate the vital role of negative politeness in relational communication. Goffman suggests that actors faced with performing an FTA, or anything possibly construed as such, fear “virtual offense.” A virtual offense is a “worst possible reading” (worst possible interpretation) by the receiver of a sender’s speech act. Here the non-communication of a polite attitude -- an absence or insufficiency of defrayal -- is read not merely as the absence of that attitude, but as the inverse, as the holding of an aggressive attitude. For example, simply omitting “please” or “thank you” at a strategic conversational juncture could in its worst light be read as a flagrant and intentional snub. Or, while the query “are you kidding?” may be interpreted as straightforward inquiry as to whether another is serious or not, an alternate (and worse) interpretation is of a sarcastic slight, that the sender really means “how could you be so utterly stupid as to say something like that?” In short, these attributional processes make all relations potentially volatile, thus actors habitually insert negative politeness into communication acts to guard against the possibility of a worst reading. It is further interesting that Goffman chose the term *virtual* offense, by which he meant that premonitions regarding worst possible readings arise in one’s inner reality – and thus are surely present in CMC.

Proposition 4: The maintenance of harmonious social relations in CMC depends not only upon the exchange of positive messages (e.g.: conveyance of friendship or social attraction: noticing others’ qualities, mention of common interests, gossip,

joking, emoticons, and so forth). Negative politeness, linguistic demonstration of carefulness, circumspection, awareness of the other's desire for autonomy and self-direction – also comprises an indispensable form of emotion-work.

3.5. Politeness and other relational ties

The CMC literature has looked at a number of different relational ties, including power, impersonality, cohesion, attraction, egalitarianism, trust, and task versus socio-emotional behaviors [25, 49]. Anthropological and social psychological literatures suggest that there exist two generic, broad-based role orientations under which many other forms of role orientation may be classified. These are social distance (distant versus close role relations) and power distance (superior/subordinate relationships) [6, 7, 9, 41]. The notion of generic role orientations is akin to factor analytic techniques in statistics; that is, what at first glance appear to be a number of disparate role orientations can be shown to share underlying commonalities, or factors.

Social distance, referencing a horizontal relation, is said to be high among individuals who are relative strangers, or who act 'as if' distant from one another. Here role behavior is characterized by mutual formality, impersonality, and circumspection – essentially the mutual exchange of negative politeness. Low social distance describes relationships among social intimates or friends. Here communication and behavior consist of displays of camaraderie, social solidarity, and in-group language – essentially displays of positive politeness [6, 28]. (Here it is helpful to realize that while negative devices are typically entwined within the performance of an FTA, positive elements are more loosely coupled. One may compliment another --“Nice tie” -- and in the next sentence broach a request; a boss may joke with a secretary in the morning knowing full well the day will occasion many work directives.)

Power (or status) distance, an important variable in CMC research [51], references a vertical dimension. Power is a central determinant of polite usage, for in power (dependency) relations subordinates strive to stay in superiors' good graces. Research shows that power has a territorial aspect; less powerful actors grant greater physical distance to more powerful others [1, 20, 23]. Individuals similarly use politeness rituals, particularly negative forms, to avoid impinging on the psychological territories of higher status actors [6, 10, 19, 27, 35-37, 39, 53].

High status individuals use less politeness, but research also shows they draw upon positive tactics with greater frequency. Higher status actors enjoy a

general right of entry into the psychological sphere of subordinates. They address subordinates by first-name, while subordinates use title-last-name speaking “up” [10, 11]. In languages with pronoun variants (e.g.: “tu” & “usted” in Spanish) the familiar form is used “down,” the formal “up” [6]. Powerful actors more often engage in phonological slurring and colloquial usage [11, 38], and initiate joking and laughter [13, 52]. Thus, the presence of such asymmetric exchanges in transcripts can be used to infer a status relationship. Conversely, egalitarian relations are characterized by exchange of relatively equivalent levels of linguistic regard.

Social and power distances share some commonality with other relational variables. For example, friendship, social attraction, group member cohesion, coding categories such as “shows solidarity” [3] -- all these correspond to the notion of close social distance. Conversely, impersonality [48], formality, coldness, “bureaucratic or official sounding,” map onto high social distance. The specific tactics of politeness may thus prove useful to researchers in measurement of these role orientations. Present research often relies upon trained coders to listen to or to read transcripts of interaction, and to then allocate remarks into various categories. While such observational schemes have been shown to be reliable, knowledge of the politeness tactics and their linguistic operationalization can enable researchers to focus on the very language used. Obviously, trained coders allocate remarks into various categories based upon their discernment of linguistic cues, including politeness. Coders are able to do this because they themselves are expert users of language, yet their interpretive processes occur at largely tacit levels.

Proposition 5: Power distance and social distance are two generic role orientations. High social distance is defined by the mutual exchange of negative politeness, low social distance by mutual positive exchanges. Status relations are defined by a distinctive asymmetry of politeness (noted above), egalitarian relations by symmetry.

Proposition 6: Positive politeness shares significant commonality with the following relational ties used in CMC research: friendship, group cohesion, solidarity, and intimacy.

Proposition 7: Negative politeness shares significant commonality with the following relational ties used in CMC research: impersonality, formality, bureaucratic, and cold/distant seeming.

3.6. The evolution of politeness norms in CMC

Two basic rules of communicative competence guide all social interaction: 1) make yourself clear, 2) be polite [34]. Clarity and consideration are opposing communication principles, and often do clash, for to be polite entails being ambiguous, while to be straightforward can offend. For example, for many tactics water down “illocutionary force” [43] -- the intent behind speech acts. Thus the imperative: "I want that report on my desk by 3 p.m.," is clear yet brusquely offensive. But the alternative: "If its not too much trouble, could you get me that report by around 3 or so?" is so vague as to diminish the likelihood of the report being done on time.

This clash between message clarity versus consideration is particularly crucial in organizational contexts -- where many applications of CMC exist, and are studied. Given organizations' intrinsic emphasis on productivity and performance goals, the likely tendency is for efficiency constraints to eclipse the need for consideration, but with dysfunctional consequences.

Related to this is the fact that in FtF nonverbal cues play a substantial role in the contextualization of politeness. For example, questions are recognized by rising inflection; Brown and Levinson [6] even suggest that negative politeness is generally accompanied by higher voice pitch. Absent such cues (i.e.: in the leanness of CMC) one would anticipate a greater tendency for message misinterpretation. Indeed, this may comprise one partial explanation for flaming. While flaming is linked to the lack of social context cues, including nonverbal behaviors, the basic cause is nevertheless attributed to lowered inhibition, greater excitation, and self-absorption -- emanating from the anonymity of CMC [47]. It may be, however, that in some instances ‘flaming’ arises from verbal messages that would not have been abrasive in FtF, but turned problematic (face-threatening) in CMC, due to lack of nonverbal cues. Here, however, flaming is defined not by a sender's intent, but by the receiver's interpretation of a message.

More importantly, messages embedding politeness are certainly not static; senders continuously adjust their level of phrasing, based upon whatever tradeoff they wish to make between clarity and consideration. One possibility is that senders will eventually gain awareness of which aspects of written messages make them vulnerable to misinterpretation (worst possible readings), and learn ways around this. One way to make up for the lack of non-verbal accompaniments would entail becoming less polite -- more direct and straightforward in CMC. A downside of this would be the appearance of rudeness; therefore senders may take the trouble to provide explanations for those messages with dual interpretations. Or, and something for which

some evidence exists, senders may adorn messages with indices of positive politeness, such as through use of emoticons, acronyms such as “jk” (for “just kidding,”), and so forth.

Indeed, if in adaptation to leanness senders wished to be more direct and forthright -- less polite -- this would be predicted to result not only in balder, more direct speech acts, but also in increased use of positive politeness. This prediction is based on Figure 1, which shows positive politeness to be more direct than negative forms. This is not to say that CMC would overall be more friendly and “backslapping” than FtF, but that the ratio of negative to positive politeness would change in the noted direction. Messages embellished with positive politeness would be clearer, because while negative politeness defrays by directly introducing ambiguity into message content, positive politeness generally allows message content to stand, while pacifying possible face-threat by encircling it with markers and expressions of kinship/like-mindedness/solidarity.

Proposition 8: Flaming derives from both senders' intent and receivers' misattribution due to CMC leanness.

Proposition 8a: CMC users wishing to avoid misattribution may compensate by being less polite, more direct. If so, we would expect the ratio of positive to negative politeness to increase in CMC, in comparison to FtF.

4. Conclusion

Anecdotal stories and editorial discussion of CMC etiquette (really the lack thereof) conceive of politeness as would an Emily Post -- a desirable social grace. CMC users are reportedly often impolite, and this is descried, often with prescriptions for improvement (such as to begin and end e-mail messages with a proper salutation). This is as it should be. For while politeness theory represents the value-free study of a set of linguistic phenomena, and their variation as a function of certain social, contextual, and cultural variables, at the level of societal and group practice there is a right and a wrong to politeness. This is because there is good reason (the maintenance of social order; the orderliness of communication; the need for individuals to abide by the group's rules for what constitutes respectful treatment of other persons) for societies (or groups) to develop norms regarding the appropriate display of consideration.

But most societies or cultures are by definition longstanding, and thus have had substantial time in which work out the rules and nuances for expected displays of politeness. CMC environments and their community of users are both relatively novel, and in

flux (i.e. technology is changing rapidly). It is reasonable to venture, that as CMC becomes more a mainstay of life, that normative routines regarding politeness, as well as other aspects of relational communication, will begin to jell.

In sum, we suggest that politeness theory can prove useful as a tool for CMC research. It is hoped that the theoretical perspective offered here will cause researchers to perceive interaction sequences in CMC in new, and interesting ways. Perhaps the operational measures of politeness, particularly the positive and negative tactics, will also prove to be useful to researchers as they analyze, and search for relational regularities and patterns, within CMC transcripts.

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