



Face Work and Politeness Strategies in Computer Mediated Discourse across Genders

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Abstract

Without considering face-work, dynamic social and cultural relations will come to a halt. Therefore, in order to avoid any friction and hostility in everyday interactions, participants have to pay due care and attention to politeness strategies and face-work. In the technology-oriented world of today, communication is not only face-to-face, but it is also rendered through the Internet. Although Goffman's theory of facework has been developed with respect to face-to-face interpersonal communication, it can also cast some light on and provide insight into the behaviors displayed by participants in computer mediated synchronous and asynchronous discourse. According to a study carried out by Siegel et al. (1986) uninhibited behavior is higher in computer-mediated communication (CMC) conditions than face to-face (FtF) inasmuch as the attention of people communicating via CMC is distracted from the social context. This research aims to investigate how this uninhibited behavior, i.e. face-threatening act happens across genders and how they try to avoid face-threatening acts and how they compensate for it when it occurs in on-line interactions. Accordingly, it uses the ethnography of communication approach and the concept of face-work to analyze the transcript of asynchronous interactions. The participants are a number of EFL Linked in, a social network, members who are English teachers and practitioners discussing EFL issues. As this paper focuses on the devices which facilitate or hamper communication, it can be illuminating and insightful for EFL and ESL teachers and learners at the same time.

1. Introduction

Linguistic politeness has drawn a special attention in pragmatics, the area of linguistics that accounts for how we attribute meaning to utterances in context, or "meaning in interaction" [4]. Adopting this approach, then politeness is a matter of specific linguistic choices from a range of available ways of saying something [5]. Different scholars have defined politeness in different manners, but what is commonly shared in these definitions is they all refer to linguistic politeness as considering others' face [4,7,8]. Although politeness is conceptualized and expressed very differently in different cultures, starting from Goffman's ideas of face, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory [2,3] adopts a definition of politeness that attempts to encompass the ways politeness is expressed universally. In this model, two types of face are posited: negative and positive. "Negative face is basically freedom from imposition; positive face is the wish to be approved of in certain respects. This distinction gives rise to two kinds of politeness: negative politeness and positive politeness" [1]. As Bloor & Bloor [1] aptly put, positive politeness may be a behavior which actively expresses solidarity and may not be considered as polite, while negative politeness is what people think of politeness in general, that is to say, making a polite request, using titles, using apologetic language, hedging, behaviors which mark social distancing, non-encroachment, deference and so on. Bloor and Bloor provide very illuminating examples:

- Negative politeness: I'm sorry to bother you, miss, but could you possibly lend me your pen?*
- Positive politeness: Charlie, chuck us a pen, mate. [1]*

With the advent of computers and the internet, communication has pushed its borders further and reached a point which wouldn't have been thought of. This medium has paved the way for both



synchronous and asynchronous mode of communication, like e-mails, instant messaging, weblogs and so on. As a result, communication is not limited to face-to-face or other traditional means, so face-threatening actions like disagreements, conflicts, criticisms, requests for information or help and so on, just like face-to-face interaction, is inevitable in this cyberspace, too. Therefore to keep the communication going, interactants should be watchful to observe some rules and adopt specific politeness strategies. The research in CMD is burgeoning, yet there is dearth of study on politeness strategies and gender in computer forums. Correspondingly, the question raised here is whether gender has an effect on the type of politeness strategies selected in computer-mediated discourse (CMD). There is a general consensus among several researchers that women develop a collaborative style of communication while men view conversation as a verbal sport in which speakers competitively battle out conflicting points of view[9]. As these Internet forums are polylogue and the discussions are shared by both genders, it is enlightening to find out whether their style of conversation still differs or they resort to the same type of politeness strategies when required. Taking interactional approach, the current study answers this question: What type of politeness strategies do males and females adopt in the Internet forums?

2. The study

2.1. Methodology: dialog analysis

To answer the research question, a quantitative method of calculating frequency rate was adopted. First, the posts and comments were selected from LinkedIn EFL teachers' forum. Then a list of politeness strategies, negative and positive, reported by Brown and Levinson were prepared for reference. Finally, the frequency rate and average of each strategy was computed.

2.2. Selection of Internet forums and participants

The EFL teachers' forum from LinkedIn, a social network, was selected to gather data. This forum is asynchronous and polylogue in which EFL issues are raised and discussed. The data analyzed here was collected from January to February 2013, included. There were 16 posts with 748 comments provided both by male and female participants who are English teachers from all over the world and they hold different degrees in TESOL.

2.3. Based on the interactional approach

Identification was made on the basis of a series of turns taken by the forum interlocutors while they were interacting with one another. As already mentioned, a list of positive and negative politeness strategies was taken from the work of Brown and Levinson [2] which are described in the following table. To respect participants' privacy, the names were changed to pseudonyms in analysis.

Positive and negative politeness strategies adopted by males and females (Brown and Levinson, 1987)

| Strategy | male | | female | |
|--|------|-------|--------|-------|
| Positive politeness strategies | | | | |
| 1. Notice and attend to the reader's wants or needs-showing that the writer is attending to what the reader has said or wants | 57 | 11.5% | 36 | 13.1% |
| 2. Exaggerate interest in, approval of, or sympathy with a previous message -using exaggeration or enthusiasm in responding | 49 | 9.9% | 22 | 8% |
| 3. Intensify interest in the writer's own contribution -Using words that make one's own comment more interesting by exaggerating or overstating | 3 | .6% | 1 | .3% |

facts

| | | | | |
|---|----|-------|----|--------|
| 4. Use in-group identity markers to convey in-group membership – Connecting with the reader by using words to indicate the reader is a member of the writer's own discourse community | 16 | 3.2% | 5 | 1.8% |
| 5. Seek agreement – Saying what the writer believes the reader will agree with by repeating or by seeking a safe topic | 10 | 2% | 9 | 3.2% |
| 6. Avoid disagreement – Saying something so as to soften disagreement, or hedging one's opinion, or being vague so as to seem to agree | 30 | 6% | 23 | 8.3% |
| 7. Gossip and small talk – Showing interest in the reader by starting a message with small talk, greetings, or unrelated topics | 52 | 10.5% | 28 | 10.21% |
| 8. Joke – Using humor to indicate shared connections with the reader | 58 | 11.7% | 9 | 3.2% |
| 9. Assert or presuppose the writer's knowledge of the reader's wants – Using language to show that the writer knows what the reader wants and is willing to fit his/her wants or needs in with the reader's | 6 | 1.2% | 6 | 2.1% |
| 10. Make an offer or promise – Saying that the writer will help the reader obtain the reader's wants | 22 | 4.4% | 8 | 2.9% |
| 11. Be optimistic – Using optimistic words to show the writer hopes that imposition on the reader is not much | 5 | 1% | 6 | 2.1% |
| 12. Include the writer and reader in the activity – Using 1st person plural pronouns to refer to writer only or reader only | 11 | 2.2% | 4 | 1.4% |
| 13. Give (or ask for) reasons – Giving/asking for reasons for an imposition on the reader | 56 | 11.3% | 18 | 6.5% |
| 14. Assume or assert reciprocity – Showing the writer has acted so as to now obligate the reader | 3 | .6% | 4 | 1.4% |
| 15. Give gifts to the reader (sympathy, understanding, cooperation) – Giving praise and statements of appreciation and gratitude | 26 | 5.28% | 17 | 6.2% |
| 16. Make room for others' discussing | 3 | .6% | 3 | 1% |
| Negative politeness strategies | | | | |
| 1. Be conventionally indirect – Imposing indirectly on the reader by relying on Gricean principles that check for the "felicity" conditions of a request | 1 | .2% | 4 | 1.4% |
| 2. Hedge – Using words to indicate that the writer is not assuming that the reader will want to comply or agree with the writer | 38 | 7.7% | 14 | 5.1% |
| 3. Be pessimistic – Saying that the writer doubts that the conditions apply for even imposing on the reader | 4 | .8% | — | |
| 4. Minimize the imposition – Using words to imply a lesser imposition on reader than it seems | 4 | .8% | 4 | 1.4% |



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|---|-----|------|-----|------|
| 5. Show deference – Using words to abase the writer, or to raise the reader's status | 4 | .8% | 2 | .7% |
| 6. Apology – Using words to indicate that the writer is reluctant to impinge on the reader | 4 | .8% | 7 | 2.5% |
| 7. Impersonalize the situation – Requesting or imposing on reader indirectly by using general words | 4 | .8% | 1 | .3% |
| 8. State the face threatening act as a general rule – Referring to an underlying principle or document that regulates the reader and writer | 21 | 4.2% | 8 | 2.9% |
| 9. Nominalize the request or imposition – Instead of using a verb, using a nominalized form to make the request or to state the imposition | 3 | .6% | 3 | 1% |
| 10. Go on record as incurring a debt or as not indebting the reader – Stating that the writer will feel grateful for help that the reader may in the future provide | 2 | .4% | 5 | 1.8% |
| Total | 492 | | 274 | |

3. Findings and discussions

The results indicate a discrepancy between males and females in adoption of some strategies. However, in some others they are just marginally different or almost the same. Considering positive politeness strategies, males use in group identity markers more often than females, for instance, quoting one of the interactants in this forum: *Samuel: Many teaching approaches have us teachers on the sidelines.*

Women regard themselves as individuals “in a network of connections” (25) [6] while for men it may not be so. Males also respond to the previous message with more enthusiasm and exaggeration in comparison to females like: *Roger: Indeed so, Sheila! Very well put!*

They might be trying to keep the conversation going by resorting to this strategy .It might also be a gesture to exercise of power on their part as well, that is, a means to direct the conversation and behave from a vantage point. What is significantly different is the males’ sense of humor to achieve intimacy with the other members which is 11.7% to 3.2%. Considering social norms, and the attitude toward women, they are expected to behave more modestly, as a result the may avoid being too humorous even in CMD in which anonymity paves the way for freedom from so called restrictions in face-to-face communication. Another strategy which is commonly adopted by males is making a promise or help which is 4.4% to 2.9%. The next strategy differentiating males from females is providing reasons when it comes to voicing disagreement, that is, 11.3% to 6.5%, which is a quite considerable. When it comes to negative politeness strategies, males also soften their contrary opinion by hedging more frequently, e.g, Simon: *I wouldn't actually accept that we have "Globish".*

A man regards the world as a battlefield of “a hierarchical social order in which he was either one-up or one-down” (24) [6] and for whom “conversations are negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand” (25) [6]. Therefore males may adopt the mentioned strategies to justify their disagreements and win the argument but by observing politeness rules and by being soft. The last strategy which was mainly adopted by males in this data was stating face-threatening activity as a general rule or principle, which is a kind of regressive action to avoid triggering negative reactions. e.g. Mark: *Accuracy has become a dirty word in some EFL/ESL circles, where communication has become the be-all and end-all of lessons: "If you can get your message across, you have succeeded," goes the mantra. That ignores factors such as the image of the speaker.*

In contrast to males, females appear to be more attentive to the readers’ wants or needs e.g.

Annie: *It seems plausible to me that it is true.*

Moreover, what is observable in the table is the females’ attempt to seek agreement, 3.2% to 2%, and avoid disagreement, 8.3% to 6%. e.g.,



Sonia: *I did not say all prescriptivists sit at the polar end; nor did I say all changes should be equally adopted.* This shows women's tendency to shrink away from conflictual situations. In their world, according to Tannen, "conversations are negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus" (25). The significant difference between females and males is when females resort to apology more than males, 2.5% to 8%, that is, almost three times as much. Or when they go on record to express their appreciation for the provision of help e.g.,
 Jessie: *However, it would be appreciated if you could all help me out by steering this and other discussions back around to the topic.*

Although many reform measures have been taken to eradicate the so-called differences and discriminations between males and females since 1970s in social life and even sexist language practices, the style of conversation between these two genders is, in some aspects, still there, which may be attributed to different approaches of men and women to life and communication. Meanwhile, the effect of computers on style of conversations and linguistic politeness manifestations shouldn't be ignored, for it might cause more and more changes in future.

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