Chapter 25
Gender and Politeness in Indian Emails

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ABSTRACT
This study extended recent attempts at analyzing and comprehending gender differences in emails with respect to cooperation and politeness in the Indian business scenario. Four hundred and ninety four emails were studied, out of which two hundred and fifty emails were written by men and two hundred and forty four by women. Collated emails related to directives and non-directives that pertained to information processing as well as soliciting task completion through adherence/violation to principles of politeness. Results revealed that specific forms of politeness will result in cooperation among team members/coworkers in email communication; adherence to politeness maxims is higher in women than in men; specific examples of violations of politeness maxims are higher in men than in women; adherence to politeness maxims in clusters is not gender specific but is contingent on the needs of the situation or the organization; and in directives the variations in use of politeness maxims across genders is the highest.

INTRODUCTION
During the last two decades computer mediated communication (CMC) which “refers to person-to-person communication. .. over computer networks” (Pickering & King, 1995, p. 479) has gained considerable momentum. Electronic mail, computer conferencing and related media all form part of CMC. Initial studies revealed significant differences in the nature of communication through CMC and face to face interaction. (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Sproull and Kiesler (1986) argued that unlike face to face interaction, CMC messages are not guided by social context cues, thus leading to differences in the way messages are structured. This “cues filtered out” perspective initially led to the belief

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that CMC was less personal and social than face to face interaction. However, several scholars have argued against this perspective. Walther (1996) used the concept of self presentation, as developed by Goffman (1959), to argue that CMC was “hyperpersonal” in nature. According to Goffman (1959), we present ourselves in a particular manner in order to create different kinds of impressions. CMC makes it easier for individuals to manage their self presentation and indulge in “selective self presentation”, which Walther (1986) termed as “hyperpersonal communication.” In the theory proposed by Walther (1986), two features of CMC – reduced cues and asynchronous communication - enable the users to control their verbal and linguistic cues and give them time to consciously construct communicative messages, thus helping them manage their self presentation.

The most commonly used form of CMC is the electronic mail (email) which is commonly used for fructification of social goals (Baym, Zhang, & Lin, 2004). Emails have become a convenient measure to construct a new type of social interaction beyond space barriers in which cooperation is desired. In the email exchange, more often than not, principles of politeness are used to secure cooperation. Cooperation between the sender and receiver is a mandate for successful or effective communication/conversation (Grice, 1975). Previous studies (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Leech, 1983) have uncovered the relationship between politeness and cooperation in face to face communication. Extending the notion of “cooperation” and “politeness” for successful communication in emails, we find that cooperation can be secured though use of language/words or non-use of specific language patterns/words. Though impact of politeness on cooperation and vice versa has been studied extensively (Dubrovsky, Kiesler & Sethna, 1991; Goffman, 1955; Brown & Levinson, 1978; Leech, 1983), scant attention has been paid to violations of politeness principles and variations in choice of principles and clusters in emails across genders.

Extrapolating the research findings in face to face communication, can we state that the link/interplay between cooperation and politeness is equally relevant in emails? Is there a difference in the structuring of emails across genders? There are almost no validation studies on emails in the Indian context which can provide an answer to the above raised questions. Our goal, in the chapter, is to gain a conceptual understanding which would help us assess how men and women appraise different situations, initiate dialogue and respond via emails. The study offers challenging scope for analysis of the level/extent of politeness or type of principles used/abused to solicit cooperation in emails by men and women. While emails can be used for both formal and informal transmission of messages, this chapter focuses on the study of formal, organizational and task related emails in which social interaction is studied through adherence or violation of politeness maxims. It applies Principles of Politeness and maxims developed by Leech (1983) to study the use of politeness in emails across genders. The chapter provides an overview of a study examining 494 emails to understand how men and women use politeness maxims to gain cooperation in workplace situations. The objectives of the chapter are as follows: To understand the influence of gender and politeness on writing style in work related emails in the Indian context. To identify gender based similarities/differences in formal style of email writing. To examine the relationship between cooperation and politeness in emails across genders. To evaluate instances of adherence and violation of politeness maxims in emails.

**BACKGROUND**

**The Indian Context**

During the last two decades, the number of women at workplace has increased significantly. Since this is a comparatively new phenomenon in