Chapter 50
Politeness as a Theoretical and Empirical Framework for Studying Relational Communication in Computer-Mediated Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual chapter draws on the sociolinguistic theory of politeness, showing how politeness provides a robust theoretical and empirical framework that can be usefully applied to the study of relational ties in computer-mediated-communication. The chapter first reviews politeness theory, and shows how politeness is operationalized relative to a definable set of linguistic indices that are used throughout everyday discourse to communicate respect and esteem for others' face. The chapter then discusses how recognition of the central role of face-work in social interchange can enhance our 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 relational variables that are mainstays of CMC research – variables such as socioemotional versus task orientation, status, cohesion, impersonality, friendship, and communicative efficiency.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-773-2.ch050
INTRODUCTION

In this article I draw upon the sociolinguistic/anthropological theory of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Watts, 2003), suggesting how this theory and its considerable body of empirical findings might usefully inform research on computer-mediated communication (CMC). It is suggested that 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 behavior, and social psychology. Yet it is surprising that for the study of what is essentially a social psychology of communication, CMC researchers have scarcely tapped into the existing body of research and theory in the fields of linguistics and sociolinguistics. Social psychology deals with social interaction, particularly among groups of individuals; sociolinguistics carries an added advantage in that it 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 basic to communicative processes, but even more so in computer-mediated environments given their narrower bandwidth. Thus, by drawing on politeness theory this paper provides a window into how one prominent and emerging area of sociolinguistic research can be applied to the study of CMC.

A second general contribution of politeness theory to the study of CMC emanates from the dramaturgical framework (Goffman, 1967) that politeness theory uses to analyze relational messages. 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 examining how different communication environments affect certain outcome variables. Yet the model of human interaction elaborated by politeness theory (Goffman, 1959, 1967, 1971), by directing our attention to the central role of face in social interchange, provides a novel yet grounded framework offering fresh insights into the emotional and interpersonal dynamics undergirding group processes -- dynamics (as I argue herein) that are just as pivotal to electronic as they are to face-to-face communicative contexts. I begin by introducing politeness theory.

POLITENESS THEORY

Politeness encompasses more than the mannered etiquette of Emily Post (Post, 1997). The theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) -- well known in anthropology, social psychology, and linguistics (for reviews: Brown, 1996; Brown & Gilman, 1991; Fraser, 1990; Kasper, 1990; Morand, 2000, 2005; Watts, 2003) -- is rooted in the dramaturgical theories of Goffman (1959, 1967, 1971), particularly relative to the central role of face in interaction. Dramaturgy here 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 (Goffman, 1967), 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, 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” (Becker, 1991:87).

While Goffman highlights individuals’ pre-