USE OF GREETINGS IN MESSAGES
FROM STUDENTS TO LECTURERS AT A HOSPITALITY COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study of politeness strategies in written discourse using Goffman's (1967) theory of "face". The study examined the use or non-use of social greetings in computer-mediated communication, focusing on emails and Short Message Service (SMS) messages from students taking courses in the field of hospitality to lecturers in a private university in Malaysia. A mixed methods design of qualitative and quantitative research techniques was used to analyse a sample of 36 emails and SMS messages selected from students who had taken or were taking an English language course at either diploma or undergraduate level. Frequency distribution and textual analyses of the data showed that the majority of students used informal greetings to begin their messages to their lecturers. Most students in fact failed to employ appropriate politeness strategies that could lessen face-threatening acts between themselves and their lecturers. It was therefore concluded that the students were generally unaware of the difference in social distance, power, and face in the academic setting under study.

Keywords: *Politeness strategies, Short Message Service, social greetings, hospitality.*

INTRODUCTION

Politeness in computer-mediated communication has become an issue of interest in recent years (Lakoff & Ide, 2005; Locher, 2010). In a particularly interesting study in an academic communication setting, Bills (2000) discovered that students and teachers often employed politeness strategies to lessen the disparity in distance and power. Students and teachers are traditionally thought to have significant differences in power and distance in their social relations, given that students are often younger than their teachers in age or are less experienced. Therefore, students are taught to look up to and respect their teachers. Besides age, the institutional setting of a school or a university that constitutes "power behind discourse" (Fairclough, 2001) is also a strong determinant of this distance.

Electronic messaging may include any form of messages in various media – text, audio or images, sent from sender to receiver via electronic means. This may include Instant messages, Personal messages, Text messages, Emails, Voicemails, Fax and Pager. Messages

may be sent on a computer network, on a cellular phone or mobile network or from a circuit-switched telephone networks (PSTN).

Email is an information and communication technology. Today, the more common short form of electronic mail has been used widely since 1993. Emails are sent from sender to receivers, much like a letter over a computer network. Although emails are thought to replace letters, the conventions and level of formality in emails greatly vary and differ depending on the purpose of the mail, who the sender is, and who the receiver will be. Email senders typically approach the more unconventional or informal methods of delivering messages since emails are often viewed similar to instant messaging.

The Short Messaging Service (SMS), generally facilitated via the ubiquitous "smart" mobile phone, is becoming an accepted means of communication between university students and their lecturers. According to Wikipedia, SMS or Short Message (or Messaging) Service is defined as the mobile telecommunication service which allows users to send text messages using mobile devices. Therefore, "SMS messages" refer to text messages sent over this service. SMS messages are usually written using abbreviated text and inadequate punctuation but with prosodic and paralinguistic elements such as emoticons. SMS language, as it were, has since been adopted in popular culture as the "new language" of communication.

The general interest in email and SMS language especially among young people, many of whom are college/university students, has been accompanied by reports from faculty members about the frequency of student mails and messages, inaccuracy of language, and particularly, disregard for social etiquette as well as "face" (Goffman, 1967).

Threats to Face

Politeness strategies are employed interpersonal communication in order to reduce the threat to a person's "face" in a certain situation (Roberts, 1992). Goffman (1967) defines the concept of "face" as the "public self-image" or the overt personality that is possessed and maintained by individuals in a society. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest two aspects for this image – the positive face and the negative face. The positive face refers to a person's want to be desirable to others, for example, to have things such as health, self-esteem and be successful professionally. A person who is "nice" is thought to have a certain degree of positive face (Coppock, 2005). The negative face, on the other hand, is a person's desire to be free from being imposed on or distracted. Izadi and Zilaie (2012) provide an example to show situations which can threaten a person's positive face and negative face – someone asking for help will cause a threat to the recipient's negative face, and someone refusing a request for help will threaten the requester's positive face.

"Threats" to a person's face are defined as "Face Threatening Acts", or FTAs. FTAs can be assessed according to the seriousness of the acts. Brown and Levinson (1978) outline the factors that need to be considered in relation to face, which are distance, power, and threat. Distance refers to "the degree of social familiarity" of the two interacting individuals. People who are familiar with each other are usually more polite and casual with each other. Less distance may occur between a lecturer whose student is also the son of a close friend.

Power is the status or ranking or the social situation of the two interacting persons. Students generally stand lower than their lecturers in the social hierarchy of the academic context, and the former are expected to be more polite to the latter. However, if the student feels that a lecturer is less experienced or of lower economic status, the student might perceive greater power over the lecturer (Roberts, 1992). *Threat* in this sense focuses on what is being requested, or what is being indirectly implied as a request for action. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) states that the language used in FTAs such as in a request, especially if it is made from a person lower in the hierarchy to someone higher, will need to have a certain degree of politeness if the person making the request desires compliance.

Politeness in Social Greetings

A greeting may be defined as "a polite word or sign of welcome or recognition" (Merriam Webster Online). In linguistics, greetings are phatic expressions which are utterances that perform a social task. Greetings are an important part of social interaction as they serve to initiate contact and influence subsequent interactions (Becker & Marks, 1999). Greetings are also an integral part of maintaining the "face" of the listener or hearer in the conversation. Both Rash (2004) and Waldvogel (2007) state that greetings can be analysed within the theories of "face" and "greetings [and farewells] offer formulas to ease the strain created for face by the beginnings [and end] of interactions (Eckert and McConell-Ginet 2003 in Waldvogel, 2007). More importantly, Waldvogel (2007) also states that the absence or presence of a greeting and the type of greeting employed sets the tone for the conversation that follows. An appropriate greeting which is correctly performed with socially sanctioned tone, voice, and body language is able to lessen the force of a potential Face-Threatening Act (FTA).

Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) lists some of the complaints made by faculty members regarding computer-mediated communication between students and lecturers which include inappropriate salutations, abbreviations, spelling and grammar errors, as well as impolite tones. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) states that lecturers and researchers often attribute this perceived inappropriate use of communication through emails from students to "erased boundaries that traditionally kept students at a healthy distance" (Glater, 2003), a decrease in awareness among the younger generation about stylistics (Baron, 2002), and the influence that the characteristics of modern technology, such as instant messaging and emails, have on other forms of writing (Baron, 1984; Halliday, 1990).These complaints may also stem from the fact that students do not observe proper etiquette regarding communication through communicating with faculty members simply because of their lack of experience as such etiquette is not usually explicitly taught as part of a formal university syllabus.

Research Questions and Purpose

The present study sought to address the following research questions:

1.   What types of social greetings do Hospitality students use in their electronic messages to lecturers?

2.   How does Hospitality students' use or non-use of greetings in electronic messages save, maintain or threaten their lecturer's face?

The aim of this study was therefore to investigate whether university students used greetings in their SMS messages to lecturers and whether the absence or the presence of greetings in their SMS messages contributed to face saving or face threatening acts.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a mixed methods design, combining descriptive methods of quantitative and qualitative research. The text sample comprised 36 emails and SMS messages sent by Hospitality student participants who were enrolled either in a diploma or undergraduate studies programme and were taking or had taken at least one English language course at the university. Most of the students were non-native speakers of English and were largely ethnic Chinese. The SMS messages had been sent to two lecturers and were collected from the lecturers' personal mobile devices and email inboxes.

The data was analysed using SPSS software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Ver. 18). Descriptive statistics by way of frequency distribution and percentage analysis were employed to answer the first research question. The frequency of the different greeting types present in the electronic messages was counted and tabulated to show the percentage of these employed by the students. Then, a textual analysis was performed on selected emails and messages to determine whether the use or non-use of greetings posed a threat to the lecturers' face with respect to factors of distance, power, and threat among Hospitality students and lecturers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis showed that the majority of students' messages did include some form of greetings. Many of the students did not use the more conventional greeting tokens such as "Good Morning" and "Good Afternoon" (12%), but rather used a more informal salutation such as "Miss" (42%) in place of the expected conventional type. Other informal greetings employed by students in the sample include "Hi" and its variations (2%) as well as "Hello" (2%). Some of the students also introduced themselves by providing either their name and/or university identification number (22%) while others started by indicating their class name and/or section number (12%). Only two students (6%) did not include any type of greetings in their messages. The table below shows the overall percentages of the different types of greetings taken from the students' emails and messages to their lecturers.

Similar to Waldvogel's (2007) findings, the results of the present analysis showed that the preferred form of greetings was not actually a conventional greeting like "Hi" or "Hello", but rather a salutation which addressed the title/designation of the lecturer herself, in this case, the use of the word "Miss". Although a greeting itself was present, there was an absence of the level of formality expected between students and lecturers. Relating to Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory of distance, power and threat, the use of "Miss" to begin a message instead of a formal greeting such as "Good Morning", showed that students were not sensitive towards these three aspects and the effects that they might have had on the lecturer's face. Without using a formal greeting, the student had in turn treated the message as if it was intended for his or her friends/peers who shared the same level in the social hierarchy rather than for a teaching member of the faculty. Examples of such messages are reproduced verbatim below.

EMAIL 1	**:** *Ms. Mei Lin, can I have the link for the mid-term practise?*	
EMAIL 2	**:** *miss, we off9 now because we have the test*	
SMS 1	**:** *Miss nay I know where is the pds class today?*	
SMS 2	**:** *Hello, Ms Mei Lin, where should we meet? I'm currently at the lobby.*	

These examples show that the students were not aware of the need to observe aspects of distance, power, and threat between them and their lecturers.

Table: Distribution of different types of greetings used by Hospitality students in electronic messages to lecturers

Greeting	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Miss, Ms., etc.	15	42
Teacher	1	2
Hi, Hye, Hey, etc.	1	2
Hello	1	2
Good morning, good afternoon, etc.	4	12
Include their name, identification number etc.	8	22
Give background information on subject or section	4	12
No greeting at all	2	6
Total	36	100

Some students also chose to introduce themselves by providing their names and/or identification number (22%) to the lecturers with the intent that lecturers would know who the sender of the message was, as many lecturers were not expected to store students' mobile numbers or emails addressed, nor to be aware which students had their lecturers' mobile number or email address. Furthermore, only a minority of students chose to introduce themselves by providing the class name or the subject title in which they were taught by a particular lecturer or the group (12%) used by many institutions to separate the classes. This was probably done in order to provide the lecturers with a clearer introduction as to who they were and who exactly the lecturer was dealing with, as lecturers often have many students from different classes and different sections. This can be an example of a strategy employed by these students in order to maintain the lecturer's negative face (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Coppock, 2005; Goffman, 1967; Izadi and Zilaie, 2012). Below are examples of the messages containing an extended introduction by the students.

EMAIL 3	**:** *Good evening Mrs Ong Mei Lin,*
	This is Yasmine Alem, from the group A, in the academic writing skills, can you please send me my coursework marks, because i didn't receive them.
	Thank you very much.
	Best Regards.

SMS 3   : *Miss Mei Lin, I am Tor Hooi Jia. I have attended your class just now in Academic Writing Skills. I want to ask if I can write more than 100 words for the introduction of myself.*

Out of the 36 messages, only two did not include any form of greetings. According to Rash (2004) and Waldvogel (2007), a greeting is important as the first step in lessening an FTA. By excluding a greeting, the student had committed a threat to the lecturer's face. Such messages are then deemed impolite, and improper to send, especially considering the existence of differences in distance and power between the lecturer and the student. Below are examples of such messages.

SMS 4   : *Most of them can't attend the English class because we have to attend an event mifb. Weil leng here.*

SMS 5   : *i am DIHM student,   I forget to pass up my individual assignment. Can I give you tomorrow? kong you sheng*

CONCLUSION

The study reported here showed the use of various types of social greetings in a sample of electronic messages sent by Hospitality students to their lecturers at a private university. Most students included some sort of greetings in their messages; however, most of the greetings were inappropriate in terms of student-teacher communication in an academic context which conventionally requires certain levels of formality in order to maintain the lecturer's face with respect to differences in social distance and power. Most students appeared to have failed to employ appropriate politeness strategies that could lessen face-threatening acts between themselves and their lecturers. It was therefore concluded that the students were generally unaware of the difference in social distance, power, and face in the academic setting under study.

However, there may be limitations to this research in that further investigation would seem imperative to examine the entire text of student messages and their lecturers' responses taking into consideration message comprehensive array of politeness strategies in relation to theory in the field. The cultural norms and values of the senders as well as the receivers of such messages may also be investigated to gain deeper insights into this emergent form of computer-mediated communication.

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