A Study on the Use of Politeness Strategy in English Business Emails Between Chinese and English Native Speakers

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English is widely adopted by international companies as working language. The ability to effectively use English to communicate is regarded as an advantage in business world. Politeness strategy is extensively employed by people in daily work. This study contrasts the politeness strategy adopted by Chinese staffs and English-speaking staffs of a multinational consulting firm in English business email exchanges. In terms of politeness strategy, Chinese staffs tend to be more polite than English-speaking staffs when the communication happens between them. Among the four groups of people, the communications between Chinese and English people are politer than the other two groups (CC and EE) because they adopted off-record in email exchanges. These differences are caused by social distance, relative power between the email initiators and the receivers as well as psychological distance between Chinese and English-speaking staffs.

Keywords: constative, politeness strategy, English business email

Introduction

Nowadays, in most of the multinational companies in China, daily email communication has become the most important communication tool in business communication apart from phone calls and conferences. Email plays a vital role in business communication. Nothing can be done without it. How to communicate efficiently and effectively in English in daily work becomes a hot topic among business employees, which attracts people’s attention. Language capability is of course an important aspect while pragmatic competence is another essential factor which contributes to the smooth business communication. Politeness principle is one of the core theories in pragmatics. Therefore, we would like to explore the politeness strategies used in daily business emails when people communicate in English and find out the use differences between Chinese and English native speakers.

Many studies have been conducted in the field of politeness strategies; however, there are few studies on business email communication in terms of politeness strategies. Some studies on politeness strategies in business emails focus on the guidance for students on how to write good and practical business emails by appropriately employing the politeness principle. There are very limited researches on the politeness strategies in business communication, but the data often used are foreign trade business letters from textbooks. Zhou (2018) uses the sample letters from Century Business English: Foreign Trade Correspondence (Second Edition)

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as the research materials to analyze the application of politeness strategies in various components of foreign trade letters, and discuss the influencing factors that are conducive to a good business correspondence based on the politeness model proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Qin (2001) analyzes the application of the cooperative principle and politeness strategies in a series of English business letters and demonstrates the complementary relationship between them. At the same time, it is also specified that business letters are not static and formatted style, but a product of interactive communication. These two studies employed the sample emails from textbooks as the research materials, which is very different from the working emails in real life. In this paper, we plan to use the emails in daily work as the materials for analyzing politeness strategies in real business communication.

**Theoretical Framework**

Brown and Levinson (1987) put forward their politeness theory in 1987 based on the Cooperative Principle proposed by Paul Grice. The politeness strategy comes from the analysis of oral expression, and later it is increasingly applied to the analysis of written texts, which is regarded as a development of the theoretical application. Brown and Levinson believe that level of politeness is determined by three factors, which are social distance, relative power, and absolute ranking of impositions. The speaker must choose a most suitable way that can best satisfy the goals to get the messages through to the hearer.

They consider politeness as linguistic strategies to satisfy communicative and face-oriented ends. Thus, this theory is often called politeness strategies. According to Brown and Levinson, to engage in normal interaction is to risk losing face (He, 2011, p. 99). The interaction here refers to the oral communication. However, we observe that politeness strategies are not only widely used in conversation, but also extensively employed in written texts. Business emails fully demonstrate the use of politeness strategies because of its practical function to bridge the connection between the two unfamiliar parties. Business emails include such functions as establishing business relationship, requesting and providing services, commercial negotiation and so on. Therefore, email communication involves information exchange that is essential to the business. When using emails properly, politeness strategy will largely facilitate the success of deals if using them inappropriately they will put deals in jeopardy.

In this paper, in order to see the distribution of these strategies we will analyze politeness strategies in the following aspects: (1) Bald on Record, (2) Positive Politeness, (3) Negative Politeness, and (4) Off Record. According to Brown and Levinson, bald on record means doing the face-threatening acts (FTA) in the most direct, clear, unambiguous, and unmitigated way possible (He, 2011, p. 101), that is to say, doing the FTA without any redressive action, for instance, “Pass me the paper”.

In terms of “with redressive action”, it means to give face to the hearer, minimizing the potential dishonor or face damage caused to the hearer, mitigating the intrusive force of requesting, suggestion, and the like. There are two choices: (1) positive politeness strategy, which is defined as saving the hearer’s positive face by means of satisfying the hearer’s wants or needs and making the hearer feel good, for example, making compliments, giving appreciation, assurance, approval, and so on; (2) negative politeness strategy, which is defined as to protect negative face. Negative face means that you do not want others to impose their wills on yourself, and you do not want your own interests to be damaged. The greater the distance is, the greater the advantage of the receiver or the greater the intensity of face threat is, and it is more necessary to implement the politeness strategies.
Off record is the strategy of using hints, implication, doing face-threatening action in an indirect, vague, and ambiguous way and giving the hearer the freedom of not recognizing the FTA. However, the conventionalized indirect expression like “can you pass me something?” is not treated as off record.

**Method**

Sixty emails written in English from a multi-national consulting firm were selected and divided into four email groups, where four types of politeness strategies were identified according to the above politeness rules. Business emails cover a wide range of topics, such as requests, suggestion, negotiation, etc.

1. **Group 1**: 15 emails between Chinese communicators (Chinese-Chinese group, CC group).
   
   Sample email:
   
   Sorry Roger, just notice there’s one week conflict. Sylva is extended on Sony to Aug. 28, while Metlife needs Sylva to start Aug. 24. Is it possible to release Sylva one week earlier? Thanks and look forward to your feedback.

2. **Group 2**: 15 emails between Chinese staff and English native speakers. These emails were initiated by Chinese to address the English native speakers (Chinese-English group, CE group).

   Sample email:
   
   Thanks for offering the catalyst/difference training/discussion on next Wednesday. I would like to invite managers/principals/partners to participate and learn about this amazingly effective service delivery format.
   
   I am asking Tina and HR to coordinate for a Webex session for the broad audience if that’s okay with you—should be no more than 20 participants.

3. **Group 3**: 15 emails between English native speakers and Chinese staff. These 15 emails were initiated by English native speakers to address the Chinese staffs (English-Chinese group, EC group).

   Sample email:
   
   I hope you are well.
   
   I was just reread the last email we exchanged last year and here we are again!
   
   I was hoping you could please let me know who Simon Sun’s assistant is? The phone directory has Enid Wang listed but I cannot seem to find her in the directory.
   
   As some context, I am helping Nikki Rath organise the APA director appraisals, and Simon is one of the appraisers. Also, do you know if Huchu is planning to fly to Sydney for these meetings? I note he is on the committee.
   
   Many thanks in advance.

4. **Group 4**: 15 emails between native English communicators (English-English group, EE group).

   Sample email:
   
   Thanks again for giving us the opportunity to work with you and your team in Beijing on the Win in China strategic plan and governance model. We appreciate the confidence you have shown by inviting us to work with you, and hope that this is the beginning of other successful engagements together.
Results Analysis

When the communication happens between both Chinese parties (CC group), their email style tends to be relatively casual and direct, so we assume they will use more Bald on Record. As for the communication between English native speakers (EE group), the performance takes a similar trend with that between Chinese speakers. However, when the exchange is between Chinese speakers and English speakers (CE group), Chinese people will be more polite because of less proficiency in language capability, so in turn, they will use more positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies.

1. The data show (Table 1, Figure 2) that the four groups take a similar trend in the employment of politeness strategies in written communication. Among the four types of strategies, they like to use negative politeness strategies most while “off record” is the least preferred strategy. Positive politeness strategy ranks the second and “bald on record” is the third.

2. When we look at the result vertically, EC group and EE group use “bald on record” while CE group and CC group, on the contrary, use none.

3. Among all four groups, only EC group and CE group use “off-record” while the other two groups do not use any. So we realize that off-record appears only between Chinese staffs and English speakers in this study. We will discuss the details later in the following section.

4. Four groups of people similarly prefer using negative politeness to positive politeness. CC group adopted significantly more negative politeness than positive politeness (Negative politeness is two times as much as positive politeness; they are 36.36% and 63.64% respectively.). EC group adopted negative strategy less than twice much as positive politeness; they are 47.83% and 26.09% respectively.

Table 1

| Politeness Strategy—Distribution in Business Communication |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Bald on Record  | Positive Politeness | Negative Politeness | Off Record  |
| CC              | -                | 36.36%           | 63.64%          | -              |
| CE              | -                | 41.67%           | 54.17%          | 4.17%          |
| EC              | 17.39%           | 26.09%           | 47.83%          | 8.70%          |
| EE              | 13.89%           | 38.89%           | 47.22%          | -              |

Figure 2. A bar chart of politeness strategy in business emails communication.

The following section is the detailed analysis of different politeness strategies used in business emails between Chinese and English native speakers.
1. CE group and EC group are, as a matter of fact, a same group; i.e., the two sides in the email exchange belong to two native language speaking communities, Chinese and English. The only difference lies in which side initiates the email. We note the result that EC group used Bald on Record most frequently while CE group used none. In terms of Bald on Record, why EC and CE show completely different results? We observe that Chinese people tend to be politer than English native speakers when they communicate in English, so they prefer not to go with Bald on Record. Similarly, our observation goes in line with Eden Sum-hung Li’s pragmatic study on suggestion making where he observed that Cantonese students when making suggestion in English tend to avoid going with Bald on Record (2010). Why the CE group uses more politeness strategies than the other three groups? First of all, people usually assume this maybe because of the language competence, as well as their confidence in their own language competence. However, as we know, Chinese staffs’ English capabilities in consulting firms are relatively high because of their good education background and some staffs’ English competence can even be regarded as very close to native speakers because of their overseas education background, so this reason should be ruled out. Secondly, we assume this may be caused by the social distance between the two groups of people. The longer the social distance is, the politer people tend to be. As we all know, the communication between Chinese and English people is a cross-cultural one and pragmatic competence is especially important in a cross-cultural communication. As Thomas (1983) points out, in cross-cultural communication, when a non-native speaker speaks English fluently, the native speakers may live with a non-native speaker’s grammatical mistakes, but they are less likely to tolerate a non-native speaker’s pragmatic deficiency and will normally attribute that to impoliteness or unfriendliness. This indicates that with grammatical errors a speaker may appear to be less proficient in the language, while pragmatic deficiency may result in the unfair judgment of the speaker’s personality. Moreover, in business world, there is a delicate relationship existing among people, which is a mixture of competition and cooperation along with the business interests. With this subtle relationship, company staffs want themselves to appear to be polite in order not to be misunderstood; therefore, they will seek to use politer words or employ more politeness strategies, especially when Chinese people communicate in a foreign language, a language that they are not as familiar as with their native tongue. In multinational companies, English native speakers are normally those with senior position or those in headquarter. So, Chinese people tend to be very polite in the interaction with English speaking people, which is in line with one of three factors—social distance proposed by Brown and Levinson.

2. For English native speakers, how come they used more Bald on Record when communicating with Chinese staffs? From my perspective, on one hand, it is because of their own language capability; they are very confident when using mother tongue to communicate with others, particularly with those whose mother tongue is not English; on the other hand, in multinational businesses, English native speakers are often those with higher social status. Because of their position, sometimes they prefer to give orders by using clear and direct words to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation. Here are some examples from the chosen materials:

1. Soft start end of next week!
2. I want Jasper to join on the 17th.

Both sentences used very simple and concise words to express the clearest instructions. These examples reflect the sender’s power over the receiver, and the senders are not afraid of the disapproval, retortion, or non-cooperation from the receivers.
3. The data in this study show that only EC group and CE group used off-record while the other two groups employed none. Let’s first see the several cases identified in this study:

3. Heard from Felicia that project solar phase III is kicking off on Monday. Please share the budget sheet and opportunity id. Since we have lots of people on beach now, we cannot afford to delay further. Thanks.

4. I know there was another note saying that Johnny had already been booked from 13/7. What is this on and who for and how critical is that Johnny is on that as this project is quite strategically important for the firm.

5. Can we catch up on this tomorrow while I’m in Shanghai? I think I have sometime mid-afternoon.

In the above three sentences, Example 3 is CE group while the other two are from EC group. Example 3 is from a resource manager to a project manager indicating that many staffs do not have work to do now, so the project must start immediately so that the human resources can be fully utilized. Example 4 implies that Johnny is critical to the speaker’s project and he wants Johnny to be released from the other one. Example 5 looks like a question asking if the receiver is available to catch up when the speaker is in Shanghai, yet the next sentence suggests that the speaker wants a catch-up exactly during mid-afternoon on the next day.

What is the possible reason why off-record strategy is only used between Chinese and English-speaking staffs? As we know, off-record is a strategy of using hints or implication to do the FTA, which is a very indirect and roundabout way to do FTA in order to mitigate the assertive force given to the hearer. Given this, I believe off-record is the politest one among all these four strategies. In addition, politeness indicates the psychological distance between the communicators. It is believed that the politer people appear to be, the more psychologically distant they are with each other. Chinese and English-speaking people are different in many aspects, for instance, their education background, culture, values, political stance, world view, and so on. Therefore, the psychological distance between these two groups is deeply rooted in their ideology and is not a gap that is easy to be met. It is the psychological distance between the two groups that gives rise to such similarity in linguistic performance.

4. According to the results, four groups show a similar trend in the employment of politeness strategies in written communication. All of them prefer to use negative politeness strategy more than other three strategies. Let’s examine some negative politeness strategies used in this study.

6. Our team’s ut forecast drops significantly from Sept, wondering if that’s a true case. Could you pls kindly advise to Betty how to update team booking from Sept?

   We have the following opportunity in pipeline, could you also advise if there are any updates? For the first 4 XXX ones, close dates are currently put as July, would you pls update according to latest status? Thanks!

   In this example, four negative politeness strategies were identified. All of them used question forms to avoid the imperative wording. This is a roundabout way to request the receivers to perform the action, which will lessen the pressure that FTA brings to the receivers, giving the receivers the freedom of their action unhindered.

7. I have a small question, can you help?

   How I could check the booking hours for all the members in my project? I supposed Talent Link provides a report.

   Here, the email sender adopts imposition minimizing strategy by using the word “small”. Through this way, the sender tries to minimize the difficulty of the question proposed; hence the time and effort used to answer the question will be minimized too. Besides imposition minimizing, in this email, the sender also uses subjectivizer “I supposed” to express his/her uncertainty about what he/she said, and the opinion merely
represents his/her own idea. When requesting for help, a weakened tone will usually deliver the sender’s desire to win favor from the receiver so as to facilitate the communication.

8. We would like to book project 35 (formerly Project X) from 3rd of June in align with the date of SoW signed. The hours for team members will remain unchanged as per pricing tool we submitted.

*Sorry for the inconvenience.*

In this mail, the email sender wants to ask the receiver, a resource manager, to assist with the resource application request; however, at the end of the email, the sender uses the strategy of apologizing to proactively ask for forgiveness for taking up the resource manager’s time and the any inconvenience that may cause to the resource manager. As we can imagine that resources are usually very limited, resources are not easy to obtain. It requires a lot of coordination and time of resource managers to solve resource conflicts before resources are secured. This strategy will give the resource manager an impression that his/her effort is respected and appreciated.

Brown and Levinson (1987) believe that negative politeness is the heart of respect behavior and it is the most delicate and conventional language strategy that takes others’ face into account. Negative politeness strategy is widely utilized in daily business communication by both Chinese and English native speakers and it proves to be the most effective and efficient way in email exchanges.

### Conclusion

Many studies show that the politeness strategies used in cross-cultural communication may reflect people’s language competence as well as their confidence in their own language capability. However, in our study of the linguistic behavior in business email communication, social distance turns out to be one of the main reasons for the extensive politeness strategy employed in business communication between Chinese and English native speakers. We find that English speaking staff goes with more “Bald on Record” when the email exchange is with Chinese staff, which is caused by their higher social status or higher position in the company. This means the speaker’s relative power over the hearer plays a role in the linguistic behavior. We also note that in the exchange of emails between Chinese and English people, they employ off-record, the politest way to do FTA, which indicates the psychologically distance between the two sides. The results also show that negative politeness strategy is the most frequently used politeness strategy no matter whether the exchanges are between Chinese people or between Chinese people and English native speakers. The variables like age, gender, or degree of intimacy between the communicators may also to some extent have an impact on the choice of politeness strategies. These variables may be of value to be studied in future work.

### References


