

# Linguistic Politeness and Face-Work in Computer-Mediated Communication, Part 1: A Theoretical Framework

Jung-ran Park

College of Information Science and Technology, Drexel University, 3141 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. E-mail: jung-ran.park@ischool.drexel.edu

**Our daily social interaction is anchored in interpersonal discourse; accordingly, the phenomenon of linguistic politeness is prevalent in daily social interaction. Such linguistic behavior underscores the fact that linguistic politeness is a critical component of human communication. Speech participants utilize linguistic politeness to avoid and reduce social friction and enhance each other's face, or public self-image, during social interaction. It is face-work that underlies the interpersonal function of language use and encompasses all verbal and nonverbal realizations that bring forth one's positive social value, namely, face. Face-work is founded in and built into dynamic social relations; these social and cultural relations and context directly affect the enactment of face-work. Analysis and a subsequent understanding of sociointerpersonal communication are critical to the fostering of successful interaction and collaboration. Linguistic politeness theory is well positioned to provide a framework for an analysis of social interaction and interpersonal variables among discourse participants inasmuch as it is applicable not only to face-to-face social interactions but also to those interactions undertaken through online communication.**

## Introduction

The effect of linguistic politeness is positioned in the realm of sociocultural phenomena. As such, it is defined as a so-called strategic device for reducing social friction by smoothing social interactions and reducing conflict during social encounters (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983). It is encoded within linguistic structure through the filtering of certain sociocultural attributes. For instance, politeness-related linguistic elements appear conspicuously in lexicon as conventionalized forms (Park, 2001, 2006).

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The lexical element *face*, as in “losing or saving *face*,” is such a conventionalized form. Relative to linguistic politeness, *face* is one of the most prominently occurring lexical elements across language and culture (Watts, 2003). As such, the concept of *face* is a cornerstone of linguistic politeness theoretical frameworks. According to Goffman (1967), *face* can be seen as positive social value that one can claim during a particular social interaction. Thus, *face* can be seen as “public self-image.” Speech participants maintain and enhance each other's *face* through the use of various verbal and nonverbal expressions and rituals.

For example, a birthday-party invitation may be indirectly refused through the use of apologetic expressions or certain nonverbal gestures. Such linguistic behavior underscores the *face* management of speech participants, and this in part informs what is known as *face-work*. It is face-work that underlies the interpersonal function of language use and encompasses all verbal and nonverbal realizations that bring forth one's positive social value, namely, *face*.

The computer-mediated communication (CMC) modes impose conversational constraints on language users due principally to the lack of contextual cues. This, in turn, may engender linguistic ambiguity and miscommunication. Park's (2007) study demonstrated that effective interpersonal communication is a critical factor in enhancing group involvement and collaboration in an online educational context. Radford (2006) also noted that “Relational aspects have been shown to be critical to client's perceptions of successful FtF reference interactions” (p. 1046). Analysis of an instant messaging (IM) chat reference service by Ruppel and Fagan (2002) indicated that interpersonal relations, associated with terms such as “friendliness” or “politeness,” are very important for a successful reference service.

As indicated in the aforementioned studies, to facilitate active interaction and collaboration for successful information sharing in an online education setting, analysis of sociointerpersonal communication among online discourse participants is essential. However, there is a lack of studies

examining sociointerpersonal communication patterns over CMC in the library and information science (LIS) literature (also see Radford, 2006; Westbrook, 2007).

With an eye towards addressing this research gap, this study aims at examining how online-discussion participants express their sociointerpersonal stance while presenting their arguments in group-discussion forums. Towards this end, this article will examine the following research questions:

1. What is linguistic politeness theory?
2. How has linguistic politeness theory been used within the CMC context?
3. What methodological merits does the linguistic politeness theoretical framework provide in analyzing sociointeractional patterns within the CMC context?
4. How do online-discussion participants engage in group discussion to present their thoughts, clarify misunderstandings, and seek information from other participants?
5. What types of interpersonal communication features are realized in online discussion?

To address these research questions, this study will present an examination in two parts. The first part of the study presents in-depth discussion on the linguistic politeness theoretical framework. Following this discussion, the manner in which the linguistic politeness framework has been used within the CMC context is reviewed through the relevant literature.

To demonstrate the methodological merits of analyzing sociointeractional patterns within the CMC context, the second part of the study (which will appear in the consecutive issue of the volume) applies the theoretical framework to a text-based, synchronous, online-discussion forum. It addresses the manner of social interaction among online-discussion participants and the interpersonal communication features realized in online discussion.

### Linguistic Politeness: A Theoretical Framework for Social Interactions

During the past decades, linguistic politeness theory has drawn significant attention from Western and non-Western scholars. Linguistic politeness operates as a strategic device for reducing social friction during social interaction (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983). As such, linguistic politeness underscores the interpersonal function of our daily language use. Through filtering of given sociocultural attributes, linguistic politeness is richly realized in lexical structure and conventionalized linguistic elements (Park, 2001, 2006). For instance, The Korean language is full of lexical elements that represent the conventionalized linguistic form *face*, a cornerstone in politeness theoretical frameworks, such as *chemyen*, *nun*, *imok*, and *nat*. This phenomenon also can be prominently observed in Japanese and Chinese lexicon (Ervin-Tripp, Nakamura, & Guo, 1995).

For comprehensive coverage of the literature on linguistic politeness phenomena, Kasper's works (1990, 2001) are the most suitable. Fraser (1999) classified politeness studies into four major categories: social norm/social indexing,

conversational-maxim, face-saving, and conversation-contract. The "conversational-maxim" (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; Edmonson, 1981) and "face-saving" (Brown & Levinson, 1987) theoretical frameworks are discussed together with politeness principles and strategies for strategic language use during social encounters.

The verbal and nonverbal activities of face-work for smoothing social interactions and for enhancing the public self-image of interlocutors are based in strategic language use. Politeness is derived from the desire to establish and maintain a public self-image that is "an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes" in Goffman's (1967, p. 5) formulation. The "conversation-contract" view also aligns with the aforementioned two frameworks on strategic politeness (Fraser, 1999). By contrast, the "social indexing" approach is based on normative politeness wherein linguistic politeness is seen as being realized by adhering to and respecting shared and collective sociocultural norms (Ide, 1989).

The Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness theory, the foundation of politeness theory since its origin, has significantly formed the state of the art. The claimed universality of the theory has been tested within indigenous social settings and languages beyond the three unrelated languages (English, Tamil, & Tzeltal) that Brown and Levinson examined with their politeness formula (English and Korean contexts: Ambady, Koo, & Lee, 1996; English address forms: Wood & Kroger, 1991; Japanese contexts: Matsumoto, 1989; Chinese contexts: Ji, 2000; Igbo contexts: Nwoye, 1992; Korean contexts: Park, 2001, 2006; Britain and Uruguay contexts: Reiter, 2000; among others). Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is founded on Goffman's (1967) notion of *face*, even though they deviate from Goffman's original *face* notion in that Brown and Levinson's *face* is self-centered while Goffman's *face* is founded in and derived from relationships with the social group and the public. In other words, the *face* of Brown and Levinson is "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (p. 61); on the other hand, the *face* of Goffman is constituted "by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (p. 5).

According to the Grice (1975) model, communication is possible because interlocutors mutually abide by a cooperative principle (CP). The CP consists of the four general maxims of *relevance* (i.e., make a contribution relevant to the exchange), *quantity* (i.e., be as informative as required), *quality* (i.e., say what is true), and *manner* (i.e., be clear). Interlocutors assume that they follow the cooperative principle and its four maxims. This allows the interlocutors to understand each other's intentions and implied meanings.

However, as stated earlier, in natural language use, speech participants often violate the Gricean maxims by being unclear, ambiguous, not relevant, and indirect. The following example is illustrative:

When Sir Maurice Bowra was Warden of Wadham College, Oxford, he was interviewing a young man for a place at the college. He eventually came to the conclusion that the young

man would not do. Helpfully, however, he let him down gently by advising the young man, “*I think you would be happier in a larger—or a smaller—college.*” (Rees, 1999, p. 5, as cited in Cutting, 2002, p. 36).

In this illustration, the quality maxim is violated in that Sir Maurice’s utterance (i.e., “I think you would be happier in a larger—or a smaller—college”) is not representative of what he was thinking. In addition, it violates the maxim of manner in that his utterance was ambiguous and even contradictory. By being ambiguous, Sir Maurice gently informed the young man that he did not make the college. Then, what underlies such violation of a Gricean maxim? Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 5), in their “face-saving” framework, stated that politeness constitutes a “principled reasons for deviation” from the Gricean maxims in the service of and concern for and the preservation of *face*.

### *Two Aspects of Face: Involvement Versus Independence*

There are two aspects of *face* values that are opposite, but interconnected: involvement (positive face) and independence (negative face). With differences in degree dependent on the setting and context of communication, these two *face* values operate in communication. The involvement aspect of *face* reflects the human need to be involved and connected with others and to be considered a supporting and amicable member of society. Conversely, the independence aspect of *face* centers on the individuality of participants, reflecting the individual’s autonomy, freedom from imposition, and freedom from connection. This aspect of *face* implicates dissociation, independence, avoidance, and distance.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the involvement aspect of *face* concerns: “the positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’ (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants” (p. 61). Thus, positive-face desire relates to fostering positive interpersonal relationships by decreasing social distance between speech participants. To promote positive-face, a variety of politeness tactics can be used. The speaker attends to the hearer’s desire to be liked and appreciated by claiming common ground, shared interest and knowledge with the

hearer, by agreeing and avoiding overt disagreement with the hearer, and by delivering compliments. This, accordingly, contributes to bringing about proximity and solidarity between speech participants. According to the coinage of Scollon and Scollon (1983), “solidarity” denotes Brown and Levinson’s positive-face.

Brown and Levinson (1987) termed the other *face* value (i.e., independence) as negative-face. The negative-face concerns “the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, i.e., to freedom of action and freedom from imposition” (p. 61). Negative-face desire comes into play when looking at the social distance that is maintained between speech participants, allowing the hearer to be free from imposition and preserve personal space and territory. The most frequently employed politeness strategy for attaining negative-face desire is the utilization of indirectness, apology, avoidance, and hesitation in varying degrees.

According to the coinage of Scollon and Scollon (1983), “deference” denotes Brown and Levinson’s (1987) negative-face. Goffman (1956) delineated the avoidance ritual, a type of “deference,” as “taking the form of proscriptions, interdictions, and taboos, which imply acts the actor must refrain from doing lest he violate the right of the recipient to keep him at a distance.” In this sense, the avoidance ritual is related to Brown and Levinson’s negative-face, which concerns the recipient’s autonomy and personal preserves. Deference can be symmetrical between social equals (e.g., friends) and asymmetrical (e.g., subordinate vs. supervisor).

Involvement (i.e., positive-face, solidarity) can be realized by a variety of politeness strategies, or face-work. Table 1 enumerates some examples.

On the other hand, the independence (i.e., negative-face, deference) aspect of *face* can be realized by giving others options, independence, and freedom from imposition. In other words, by minimizing assumptions about others’ interests, speech participants can maintain social distance and attend to the hearer’s *face* need for independence. The following strategies listed in Table 2 are some examples.

As mentioned, these two *face* desires (i.e., involvement and independence) are interconnected, even though there are differences in degree.

TABLE 1. Some examples of positive politeness strategies (adapted from Brown & Levinson, 1987).

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(1) Paying attention to others (e.g., <i>Are you feeling better today? How did your job interview go yesterday?</i> )
(2) Showing agreement (e.g., <i>yes, I thought so too.</i> )
(3) Avoiding overt disagreement; using partial agreement prior to disagreement (e.g., <i>I like your idea but in this case we don't have an option for that.</i> )
(4) Presenting common ground and shared interests or background (e.g., <i>Same here. I know exactly what you mean.</i> )
(5) Using in-group markers by employing nickname and/or first name instead of using formal surname or title
(6) Indicating the speaker knows hearer’s wants (e.g., <i>I'm sure you want to complete the task as soon as possible.</i> )
(7) Using humor
(8) Offering and/or promising (e.g., <i>I'll repay you as soon as possible.</i> )
(9) Giving compliments (e.g., <i>I think this is a great idea!!</i> )
(10) Giving gifts or sympathy or understanding to the hearer
(11) Contraction and ellipsis [e.g., <i>(Do you) wanna go?</i> ]
(12) Being optimistic (e.g., <i>I'm sure it's gonna work this time.</i> )

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TABLE 2. Some examples of negative politeness strategies (adapted from Brown & Levinson, 1987).

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(1) Making minimal assumptions about the hearer's interests (e.g., <i>I don't know if you want to join us for dinner tonight.</i> )
(2) Being pessimistic (e.g., <i>Probably you wouldn't like this idea but Professor Park, could I have an extension for the paper?</i> )
(3) Being apologetic (e.g., <i>Sorry to keep you waiting.</i> )
(4) Using surname and title or giving deference (e.g., <i>Dr. Park, can I ask you a question?</i> )
(5) Giving option for refusal of the speaker's request or suggestion (e.g., <i>I understand if there's a no more time slot available for a meeting with you tomorrow.</i> )
(6) Being conventionally indirect (e.g., <i>Can you please close the door?</i> )
(7) Minimizing imposition (e.g., <i>Could I talk to you for just a minute? This is just a suggestion.</i> )
(8) Self-effacement (e.g., <i>I don't know anything about it but ...</i> )
(9) Overt emphasis on other's relative power
(10) Using formal words and/or speech style
(11) Being hesitant (i.e., <i>Well, er, I think it would be much better if we postpone our meeting.</i> )
(12) Use the past tense to create distance (e.g., <i>I was wondering if the review process had begun.</i> )

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### *Social and Interpersonal Variables in Enactment of Politeness*

Politeness, as mentioned at the outset, is a sociocultural phenomenon, and thus its interpretation is dependent upon a given-society's sociocultural attributes. There are three main variables that affect realization of politeness during interpersonal relationships among participants: *power*, *distance*, and *imposition*.

The following is Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness assessment formula:  $Wx = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + Rx$ . In this formula,  $W$  signifies the weightiness of a face-threatening act  $x$ ; Face-threatening acts are utterances or actions that threaten a person's public self-image (i.e., *face*). Sociopsychological *distance* between speaker and hearer is represented as  $D(S, H)$ ; *Power* of the hearer over the speaker is denoted as  $P(H, S)$ ;  $Rx$  denotes absolute ranking of the *imposition*, with  $x$  signifying variables in a given culture. Linguistic enactment (i.e., face-work) to maintain and promote *face*, depends on the speaker's cognitive assessment of the aforementioned interpersonal variables.

In Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, the previously mentioned interpersonal variables fundamentally underlie the operation of face-work. In other words, social interactants discern interpersonal variables during their social interactions. Thus, when the speaker perceives an asymmetrical power difference and greater sociopsychological distance from the hearer and a greater imposition (e.g., asking for a promotion, borrowing money), he or she tends to be more polite, owing to the perceived *face* threat.

### *Politeness Strategies*

Depending upon the speaker's cognitive assessment of the previously mentioned interpersonal variables, various strategies can be employed to save and promote one's public self-image (i.e., *face*). Brown and Levinson (1987) delineated four major categories of these strategies in the following way [Requestive speech acts are added for illustration.]:

- Bald-on-record: "Open the window! It's hot."
- Positive politeness (solidarity): "Jake honey, will you open the window? Thanks."

- Negative politeness (deference): "Jacob, er . . . I'm sorry to bother you, but could you possibly open the window? It's awfully hot in here."
- Off-record: "It's hot in here."

As shown, bald-on-record conforms to the Gricean maxims of the cooperative principle (Grice, 1975) in that it is direct, concise, clear, and unambiguous. As well, there is no linguistic device for mitigation with which to lessen the force of such a direct request. This strategy does not give much option for the hearer to refuse the speaker. In this sense, bald-on-record can be used when there is an overt power difference between the interlocutors (e.g., parent to a child). On the other hand, the bald-on-record strategy demonstrates a close, informal, and relaxing interpersonal relationship between interlocutors. Thus, bald-on-record is frequently observed in language use between intimates such as close friends and family members.

As presented earlier, the positive politeness strategy attends to the hearer's positive-face desire by demonstrating proximity, friendly attitude, and by claiming common ground between interlocutors. In the illustration, such solidarity is expressed by using in-group terms such as a nickname (i.e., *Jake*), an endearment term (i.e., *honey*), and acknowledgement (i.e., *thanks*), followed by the requestive speech act.

On the other hand, the negative politeness strategy attends to the hearer's negative-face desire by avoiding intrusion, maintaining social distance, and by giving the hearer options to refuse the speaker's request or suggestion. Frequently, negative politeness is realized through conventional indirectness, apology, circumlocution, and hesitation, as in the previous illustration: "Jacob, er . . . I'm sorry to bother you, but could you possibly open the window? It's awfully hot in here." Unlike the *positive politeness* strategy, the given name (i.e., *Jacob*) followed by a hesitation marker (i.e., *er*) and an apology (i.e., I'm sorry . . .) is used prior to a conventional requestive speech act (i.e., *could you . . .*). Explanation of the request (i.e., *it's awfully hot in here*) using an intensifier (i.e., *awfully*) also is added. All these devices contribute to the indirect circumlocution.

The following invitation to a party also illustrates differences between positive and negative politeness strategies:

- (a) I know you're not that crazy about parties. But come to the party tonight! You'll love it.
- (b) It would be nice if you could come to the party tonight if you have got the time. Well, we understand if you can't make it.

Even though these utterances deliver the same message, the pragmatic significance is markedly different beyond the literal semantic meanings. In other words, Utterance (a) delivers an informal and close interpersonal relationship between the interlocutors. This is realized through several positive-politeness strategies such as the claiming of common ground and indication that the speaker knows about the hearer's dislike of parties (i.e., *I know . . .*). Usage of informal vocabulary such as "crazy," use of a direct speech act (i.e., *come to the party tonight*), and expression of optimism about the hearer's enjoyment of the party (i.e., *you'll love it*) are all realizations of proximity and solidarity between the interlocutors.

On the other hand, Utterance (b) conveys attendance to the hearer's negative-face desire such as independence, freedom from imposition, and respect for personal space, time, and decision. This is realized by negative-politeness strategies: giving the hearer an option to turn down the speaker's invitation, using the conditional clause denoting tentativeness (i.e., *. . . if you have got the time*), and by fronting pessimism (i.e., *. . . we understand if you can't make it*), preceded by a hedge (i.e., *well*) denoting hesitation.

The fourth category of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategy is the so-called *off-record tactic*. As shown in the illustration (i.e., *It's hot in here*), the off-record strategy is the most indirect speech act in the sense that the speaker gives full option to the hearer to ignore any speech acts from the speaker. In other words, the hearer can ignore the speaker's indirect and vague request for opening the window by not doing anything. In so doing, the hearer has freedom from imposition without losing *face*.

The four categories of politeness strategy can be used in combination; however, depending on the discourse genre and participants, there might be differences in degree of usage of certain politeness strategies. For instance, children's discourse among their peer group may present high utilization of bald-on-record, which is a direct speech act. On the other hand, formal business discourse may present a high percentage of negative-politeness strategy. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the utilization of these strategies is dependent upon the speaker's cognitive assessment of interpersonal variables such as power difference, social distance, and weight of imposition. This underscores the critical aspect of socio-cultural context for interpreting and analyzing discourse.

## Politeness in CMC

Various subfields in linguistics, such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and discourse, deal with linguistic politeness

as a principal research area. Linguistic politeness also is a major research area in related disciplines such as communication and anthropology (see Duranti, 1997; International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies, 2006; Saville-Troike, 1996). In these mentioned fields, linguistic politeness has been very actively studied, especially in relation to naturally occurring discourse in the FtF setting.

Morand and Ocker (2002) reviewed politeness theory and stated that face-threatening acts are inevitable in interaction across various CMC channels. That is, the *face* (i.e., public self-image) of speech participants can be threatened during CMC interaction just as it can in the FtF setting. In our daily social interaction, speech acts such as disagreement, interruption, request, and refusal are unavoidable, posing a threat to public self-image (i.e., *face*). Accordingly, Morand and Ocker suggested that "politeness theory can be useful as a tool for CMC research."

By employing Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, discussed in depth in the previous section, to e-mail discourse, Harrison (2000) noted that the politeness theoretical framework can be useful in analyzing social interaction through e-mail discussion. The analysis of 23 messages from an e-mail discussion list of Megabyte University, the subscribers of which are mostly college professors, showed that linguistic politeness is prevalent in this CMC channel. The employment of politeness tactics by group participants promotes the discussion and strengthens the group by creating a positive atmosphere for interpersonal interaction.

In line with the previous study, Park (2008) demonstrated that the effective use of linguistic politeness tactics promotes active group interaction in the context of synchronous online education. Data analysis based on the politeness theoretical framework shows that online discourse participants employ a variety of creative mechanisms drawn from linguistic and paralinguistic devices that serve to signal interpersonal solidarity and rapport. Through use of such devices, a hidden and invisible "voice-over" text is realized even in text-based CMC group interaction. Park (2000) showed that these interpersonal and affective features set the tone of positive interpersonal relationships and decrease the social distance between speech participants.

In the LIS virtual-reference context, however, there are very few studies applying linguistic politeness theoretical framework. In these subsections, studies related to the politeness theoretical framework are presented. They are derived from a variety of disciplines as well as from the LIS domain; in particular, the virtual-reference context.

## Socioemotional Content in Nonverbal-Communication Cues

In daily social interactions, speech participants use nodding, eye contact, and facial expressions to indicate interest, understanding, or confusion. These are instances of nonverbal communication. Such nonverbal-communication cues work to align and modify speech participants' verbal exchanges. Accordingly, nonverbal-communication devices function to enhance and promote communication flow and

progress. As well, these cues enable speech participants to convey a variety of sociocognitive as well as emotional meanings.

Walther (1992) comprehensively presented studies on interpersonal relations while reviewing interactive-media theories. Inconsistencies of CMC studies stemming from different research designs (e.g., experimental and field studies) and research methods dealing with only verbal data are noted. Studies based on interactive-media theories address the lack of nonverbal communication and social contextual cues in the CMC channel. This is the so called *cues-filtered-out* approach (Culnan & Markus, 1987); such lack of nonverbal and social contextual cues affects the interpersonal relations in CMC and renders the interaction impersonal.

Walther (1992) noted the inconsistencies of CMC research. Studies based on experimental design are generally in line with the perspective of impersonal communication in the CMC channel, so-called cues-filtered-out due to the absence of nonverbal- and relational-communication cues. On the other hand, field studies of e-mail have reported a greater frequency of socioemotional content compared to experimental studies.

For instance, Rice and Love (1987) demonstrated high employment of socioemotional content in CMC. They analyzed 2,347 sentences from transcripts of bulletin-board postings of a conference through the CMC channel using interaction process analysis (IPA; Bales, 1950). In IPA, socioemotional content includes solidarity, tension relief, agreement, antagonism, tension, and disagreement. Such socioemotional content relates to *face* desire in terms of linguistic politeness. The analysis of the study showed that approximately 30% of the content comprised socioemotional sentences: “Solidarity” (18%) is the primary socioemotional content followed by “provision of personal information” (8.4%).

In reference to weaknesses in CMC research, Walther (1992) questioned the validity of the cues-filtered-out approach based on verbal-only data: “. . . CMC is less socioemotional or personal than face-to-face communication is based on incomplete measurement of the latter form [i.e., nonverbal messages—added by author]” (p. 63). Walther (1992) suggested that “over time, computer mediation should have very limited effects on relational communication, as users process the social information exchanges via CMC” (p. 80). This prediction has been supported by several other studies.

As an example, while examining the impact of emoticons such as the so-called *smiley face* (☺) on interpretation of messages delivered through the CMC mode, Walther and D’Addario (2001) demonstrated that online language users creatively use nonverbal-communication cues. The use of emoticons allows online language users to imbue their messages with sociointerpersonal meaning. Carter (2003) also asserted the critical role played by nonverbal-communication cues in relation to interpersonal relations: “The impact of nonverbal behavioral signals on interpersonal communication may outweigh any verbal content” (p. 33).

A study by Park (2007) also demonstrated that nonverbal-communication cues are prevalent in the CMC channel. In the CMC setting, online language users have developed devices to bring about nonverbal communication through a variety of linguistic and nonlinguistic tactics. Park (2007) examined the communication constraints of the text-based synchronous CMC channel that hinder expression of the interlocutor’s interpersonal and affective stances during online social interaction.

Park (2007) also looked at linguistic and paralinguistic mechanisms that online language users employ to overcome the constraints that the CMC channel imposes on online language users. The findings of the study showed that online discourse participants employ a variety of creative linguistic and paralinguistic devices to express interpersonal and affective stances. These devices include contractions of linguistic forms, prosodic features, and typographical conventions such as capital letters and emoticons to simulate gesture and facial expressions.

#### *Socioemotional Content in Discourse Markers*

Socioemotional content also is delivered through the use of hedges in addition to nonverbal-communication cues. Hedges (e.g., *sort of, kind of, I think, I guess, well, you know*) are a type of discourse marker that functions to modify semantic meaning and/or mitigate the illocutionary force of an impolite utterance. Discourse markers are phonologically reduced linguistic elements that typically consist of one to three syllables. On the morphosyntactic level, these markers occur either outside the main syntactic structure or are loosely attached to it, mostly in the utterance initial position. Discourse markers comprise a heterogeneous set of linguistic forms such as a phrase (e.g., *I mean, you know*), an adverb (e.g., *actually, now*), and an interjection (e.g., *oh, aha*). Owing to such characteristics, they are generally not captured in a standard dictionary.

Note that the nonusage of discourse markers in certain contexts may produce unnatural and impolite utterances. In addition, discourse markers have a tendency to co-occur with prosody, accent, or intonation as a separate tone group. In everyday language use, discourse markers occur with high frequency (Brinton, 1996).

While comparing the use of discourse markers in the FtF setting, Brennan and Ohaeri (1999) examined their usage in the synchronous online-chat setting. The study has indicated that the use of hedges in a real-time, online-chat setting is less than that in the FtF setting. This derives from the fact that keyboarding requires more time and effort to produce hedges (i.e., discourse markers) than does speaking. Brennan and Ohaeri noted that the impression that communication through the CMC channel is less polite than that through FtF is not because of depersonalization of the CMC channel but rather because of the less frequent use of hedges.

The effects of time restrictions in employing sociointerpersonal content were examined by Walther, Anderson, and Park (1994). In contrast to earlier studies on impersonal

communication in the CMC channel which were called as “cues-filtered-out” owing to the absence of nonverbal and relational communication cues, in this study time limitations on message exchange modulate employment of socially oriented content by language users. Put differently, if there are no time restrictions in exchange of messages, the use of socially oriented communication cues such as discourse markers (i.e., hedges) is greater than in time-limited CMC interaction.

### *Interpersonal Relations in Virtual Reference*

As stated earlier, linguistic politeness has been relatively unexplored in the LIS virtual-reference context. In this subsection, studies dealing with interpersonal relations in relation to linguistic politeness directly or indirectly are presented.

Westbrook (2007) addressed the critical need for theory development regarding interactive digital reference service. She demonstrated the effectiveness of application of formality indicators drawn from the linguistic politeness theoretical framework for examining interaction between librarian and user. By utilizing a purposive sample of 402 transcripts derived from a chat reference service, Westbrook identified informality indicators such as the use of linguistic contractions, abbreviation and acronyms, slang (e.g., informal speech style), and nonconventional punctuation markers (also see Park, 2007). The study noted that lack of these devices may increase the formality level from both ends (i.e., librarian and user). As contextual informality indicators, the following categories were identified: expressions of need, gratitude, self-deprecation, apologies, humor, self-disclosure, and group identity. Westbrook noted that the employment of such informality indicators attain to the interlocutor’s positive and negative *face*. (The two *face* desires were discussed in depth in earlier sections.)

The shift of formality levels occurs during the reference interview stages (i.e., opening, clarifying, answering, evaluating, closing). For instance, answering by the librarian entails providing instruction and advice to users that may pose a potential threat to interlocutors’ *face*; in this stage, the formality differential becomes marked. On the other hand, during the closing stage, formality may drop to a lower level. Westbrook (2007) noted that advice to users that mitigates any potential *face* threat is more valuable than that which is given without such mitigation. That study indicated that the linguistic politeness theoretical framework can be used effectively for interactive reference service:

Chat interactions can build from a basis of trust sufficient to support the users’ expressions of confusion, urgency, need, and other concerns. Librarians who can actively help resolve those concerns must go well beyond simply providing information. They must build a relationship. In order to do so, they must make effective use of politeness theory. . . . The practice implications encourage incorporation of politeness theory into training. . . . Once librarians have a firm grasp of the nuance of politeness theory, they are likely to seriously revamp policies. . . (pp. 640, 654).

As stated earlier, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory was greatly influenced by Goffman’s (1967) work on *face*. Mon (2005) presented a concise overview on *face* threat drawn from Goffman’s works (1956, 1967). Mon (2005) showed that Goffman’s *face* threat theory can be effectively used for studying interpersonal interactions in information-seeking contexts. Despite such potential, she noted that *face* threat theory has not yet been substantially used in the field of information science.

Mon (2006) investigated user perceptions of digital reference service through e-mail and chat. One of the research questions in her study concerns perceptions of interpersonal communication between users and librarians. To address this question, she employed a linguistic politeness framework based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory. Mon (2006) utilized a range of data sources, including transcripts of e-mail, chat digital reference service, and subsequent interviews with participants.

The data analysis indicates that users positively perceive the interpersonal connection with librarians during the process of digital reference service. For instance, users are appreciative of efforts employed for enhancing interpersonal communication through utilization of the user’s name or provision of contact information or name. Actions that users cite positively also include open and polite communication styles and interpersonal rapport developed through working and follow-up with users and inviting users to return to the reference service.

On the other hand, the findings of the study indicate that users negatively perceive actions that are not informed by interpersonal communication. For instance, automated responses, phrased as “computer-generated reply,” or “copy and paste,” and insufficient interaction, phrased as “a lot of silence from the other end” together with impolite communication styles, are all actions that are negatively perceived by users. Mon (2006) saw user’s negative experiences with automated responses in the following way:

The issue of “copy and paste” responses and other impersonal, automated answers emerged as a recurring theme for users in expressing their preferences for receiving personal responses from a real librarian, rather than automated responses such as “form letters” or “FAQs” (p. 149).

It can be seen, then, that interpersonal rapport has a significant impact on positive perceptions of reference interaction with librarians.

User perceptions of reference service also were studied by Ruppel and Fagan (2002), although linguistic politeness was not applied in this study. Ruppel and Fagan analyzed survey results on the use of an IM chat reference service as opposed to traditional reference-desk service. The users’ comments ( $n = 115$  of 340 participants) in the free-answer box from the survey indicate the importance of interpersonal relations, associated with terms such as “friendliness” or “politeness,” for successful reference service.

According to the survey results, the most prominent advantages of IM concern “convenience” ( $n = 28$  of 51), followed

by “anonymity” ( $n = 11$  of 51). The term *anonymity* may relate to *face* concerns centering on user desires to preserve positive self-image. The following comments from the survey illustrate this (Ruppel & Fagan, 2002): “If a person feels dumb for asking, they aren’t ‘revealed,’” and “You feel free and you are not shy cause you cannot see your helper” (p. 190).

In line with the aforementioned studies in terms of the critical role of interpersonal relations and rapport, Radford (2006) demonstrated that interpersonal relations play a critical role in perceptions of successful interaction. Radford analyzed interaction between librarians and users by utilizing a communication theory from Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson’s (1967) work *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. The theory is closely related to the linguistic politeness theoretical framework; accordingly, the subthemes for both “relational facilitators” and “barriers” in relation to interpersonal communication between librarian and client are closely interrelated with politeness tactics. For instance, the subtheme “rapport building” can be understood as “positive politeness strategy;” the subtheme “deference” corresponds to “negative politeness strategy.” (Positive and negative politeness strategies were presented in earlier sections.)

In summary, online discourse participants adapt to the CMC setting and employ a variety of creative communication devices to express sociointerpersonal content. In the CMC setting, online language users develop devices to effect nonverbal communication through a variety of linguistic and nonlinguistic tactics. Thus, sociointerpersonal content appears in CMC interaction through nonverbal- as well as verbal-communication cues. Such sociointerpersonal content indexes the interpersonal relationships and rapport of online discourse participants. In the LIS reference context, as demonstrated by several studies (Mon, 2006; Radford, 2006; Ruppel & Fagan, 2002; Westbrook, 2007), such interpersonal relationships play a critical role in the user’s perception of successful interaction.

## Conclusion

In daily social interaction, involvement with speech acts such as request, disagreement, apology, acknowledgment, and thanking is inevitable. Our daily social interaction is anchored in interpersonal discourse; accordingly, the phenomenon of linguistic politeness is ubiquitous in everyday language use. Speech participants mutually abide by the CP and its attendant maxims (Grice, 1975): relevance (i.e., make a contribution relevant to the exchange), quantity (i.e., be as informative as required), quality (i.e., say what is true), and manner (i.e., be clear). Mutual conformance to the CP, a mostly subconscious and automatic process, allows interlocutors to understand each other’s intentions and communicate each other.

Daily communication, however, also is punctuated by frequent deviation from the CP in terms of being unclear or indirect. Such linguistic behavior underscores the fact that linguistic politeness is a critical component of

human communication. Speech participants deviate from the Gricean maxims and strategically utilize linguistic politeness to avoid and reduce social friction and enhance the *face* of fellow interlocutors during social interaction. Face-work for smoothing social interactions and enhancing public self-image is dependent upon the speech participants’ cognitive assessment of sociointerpersonal variables that surround a given interactional context. This implies that it is critical to take into account dynamic sociointerpersonal variables within a given social context in interpreting and analyzing discourse.

Analysis and a subsequent understanding of sociointerpersonal communication are critical to the fostering of successful interaction and collaboration. Linguistic politeness theory is well positioned to provide a framework for analysis of social interaction and interpersonal variables among discourse participants. The theory is applicable not only to FtF social interaction, as has been well studied, but also to those interactions undertaken through the CMC channel, an area that until now has been relatively unexplored in the LIS domain.

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