

Language and power: an empirical analysis of linguistic strategies used in superior–subordinate communication

DAVID A. MORAND*

School of Business Administration, Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg, Middletown, U.S.A.

Summary

Importing the anthropological, sociolinguistic theory of ‘politeness’ into the domain of organizational studies, this article presents results of a laboratory study that illustrates how power is communicated through specific linguistic gestures differentially used by superiors and subordinates throughout daily interchange. The approach taken illustrates how language is amenable to quantitative, as opposed to sheerly qualitative analysis. Contributions of politeness theory to the study of organizational communication, of influence tactics, the distortion of communication in hierarchical relations, and the presumed egalitarianism associated with programmes of workplace participation, are discussed. Copyright © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

The organizational literature emphasizes various bases and structural contingencies that give rise to power differentials (Brass, 1993; French and Raven, 1959; Ibarra, 1993; Hinings *et al.*, 1974), but little attention is paid to how individuals display and communicate relative power at the face-to-face level. Yet power is surely not an abstraction that hovers above actors as they go about their daily business. Role theorists such as Goffman (1959, 1967, 1983) emphasize how social roles are communicated and enacted through a multitude of fine-grained gestures that actors exchange on an ongoing basis. The present article focuses upon how power differentials among superior and subordinate actors in organizations are enacted through ongoing role behaviors, specifically through language behaviors used in everyday encounters.

There is considerable value in using a linguistic approach to the study of superior–subordinate relations. Managers spend up to 90 per cent of their time engaged in verbal activity (Gronn, 1983; Kanter, 1977; Mintzberg, 1973). Yet most research on superior–subordinate communication scrutinizes interaction processes occurring only at higher levels of analysis. For example, while research on influence tactics (Schermerhorn and Bond, 1994; Yukl and Falbe, 1990) presumes that patterns of language are important in the implementation of such tactics, the studies rely

* Correspondence to: David Morand, School of Business Administration, Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg, Middletown, PA 17057, U.S.A. E-mail: dam9@psu.edu

upon self-report or on abstract survey measures to define the tactics, neglecting the flow of verbalization as a possible data point.

Further, if one can detect how power differentials are embedded in everyday speech it may be possible to understand how the more abstract role requirements of these organizational positions are translated into the minutia of everyday gestures and 'interaction ritual' (Goffman, 1967). We may thereby capture and thus analyze an important dynamic component of role behavior. Understanding how power differentials are encoded in language can also shed light on processes of status levelling in organizations. Programmes of workplace participation and employee involvement have increasingly emphasized the value of status levelling (Howard, 1995). An analysis of language that shows how power is enacted and communicated in superior-subordinate relations, can, by implication, also illustrate how status relations are diminished or blurred at a behavioral level of analysis.

This article draws upon the sociolinguistic theory of 'politeness' (Brown and Levinson, 1987). 'Politeness' denotes more than social pleasantries, for such behaviors are fundamental to the regulation of human conduct at the face-to-face level. Polite linguistic expressions are also integral to the elaboration and maintenance of social hierarchies in organizations. While new to the organizational literature, politeness theory is a well-recognized research paradigm within the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and anthropology (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Brown and Gilman, 1991; Fraser, 1990; Ting-Toomey, 1994).

Prior Literature on Behavioral Indices of Power

Research on small groups has long shown interaction among undifferentiated actors tends to result in status distinctions (Lewin *et al.*, 1939; Bales, 1950; Slater, 1955; Hare, 1976). While concluding that status differentiation is an emergent property of interactions, this research pays little attention to specific behavioral or communicative cues. One important exception is Bales' (1950; Bales, Cohen and Williamson, 1979) observational coding scheme. Bales' scheme points to specific behaviors displayed by 'dominant' versus 'submissive' group members. High or low observed frequencies of these behaviors are coded, then used to define 'dominant' or 'submissive' individuals. While the coding scheme is reliable in its ability to measure specific behaviors, the validity of the coding criteria is more difficult to assess; there is insufficient exploration of the specific theoretical logic behind the measures selected to define status differentiation. For example, Bales does not explain why specific observed acts such as 'shows solidarity' or 'gives suggestions' are thought to measure dominance; rather these behaviors are simply correlated with perceptions of dominance. Moreover, the primary criteria used in defining an individual as dominant are self-referential; 'dominant' individuals are defined as those who 'act overtly towards others in a way that seems dominant' (Bales, Cohen and Williamson, 1979, p. 359). This provides no real causative framework for explaining how or why certain individuals become dominant.

A second line of research, dominance theory (Mazur, 1983; Lee and Ofshe, 1981; Ridgeway, 1984), builds on ethological observations of behavioral pecking orders in animal species, applying the model to human interaction. Within this research paradigm primates, due to their biologic and physiognomic affinity to man, are often represented as a link between humans and

other animals. For instance, in both species, gaze plays a remarkably similar role in the interactional allocation of dominance (Exline, Ellyson and Long, 1975; Jay, 1965). Other behavioral cues used by humans to signal dominance and deference have been studied—including voice tone, interruptions, body posture, and spatial proximity (Leffler, Gillespie and Conaty, 1982; Mehrabian, 1972; Rosa and Mazur, 1979). Yet a significant limitation of dominance theory is that it offers a characterization of human interaction that is ultimately analogous to the viewing of a silent movie, or a film in a foreign language. That is, although observers can understand much of what is transpiring by making inferences based upon proxemic, gestural, facial, and intonational cues, altogether absent is an analysis of the role of language in the enactment of power. This is a serious drawback, for language is human's 'thickest', most critical, most information-rich communicative medium. Politeness theory, in contrast, directly scrutinizes language.

A Conceptual Model of Politeness Behavior

Politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987, 1987) is rooted in Goffman's (1967: p. 5) notion of face '... the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact'. Individuals continuously engage in dramaturgic work designed to sustain and enhance their public face. Goffman stresses the effort individuals put into maintaining and investing their own face, but politeness takes the opposite view, highlighting the role played by individuals in upholding and preserving the faces of those with whom they interact. There is a general expectation that actors who surround us in daily interaction will provide us interactional support and affirmation. Accordingly, politeness means 'phrasing things in such a way as to take into consideration the feelings of others' (Brown and Gilman, 1991).

The crucial role of politeness is best observed in connection with a specific set of interactional encounters—known as 'face-threatening-acts' (hereafter FTAs). An FTA occurs when one person has occasion to threaten or otherwise imperil the face of another. Such conflictual events are common and often unavoidable, including acts of contradicting, criticizing, disagreeing, interruption, imposing, borrowing, asking a favour, requesting information, embarrassing, bumping into, and so forth. Politeness is operationalized as an array of linguistic gestures used to minimize or defray such threats. That is, when actors have occasion to 'do' or to 'perform' such a speech act they typically draw upon linguistic politeness routines, constructing speech acts so as to soften or to mitigate the force of the FTA, and thus preserve, at least to a degree, the addressee's face. To illustrate: if one has occasion to disagree with another, one might state this directly ('You are wrong'). Alternatively (and more likely) one might couch the FTA in polite phraseology ('Well, I'm not sure I see things the same way you do, have you considered that perhaps ...'). Wanting to borrow a dollar (an act presupposing some rights of access to the personal territory, attention, and property of the hearer, and by extension their face), rather than 'Give me a dollar', one might utter 'May I borrow a dollar?' Should the intrusion be judged especially severe we might here 'Excuse me, I'm really sorry to bother you like this, but I seem to have forgotten my wallet. I was wondering if I might borrow a dollar from you, just until tomorrow that it'. Such common bits of phraseology serve a vital interactional function, moreover, they are related to power in systematic ways.

One can intuitively discern degrees of politeness. However, we can also identify specific speech elements—'negative' and 'positive' politeness—that contribute to intuitive judgements. The

Table 1. Tactics of negative politeness

Tactic	Example
1. Use indirect questions such as enquiries into the hearer's ability or willingness to comply	'Can you tell me what time it is?'
2. Use hedges: words or phrases which diminish the force of a speech act	'Can I <i>perhaps</i> trouble you?'
3. Use the subjunctive to express pessimism about hearer's ability or willingness to comply	' <i>Could</i> I ask you a question?'
4. Use words or phrases which minimize the imposition	'I need <i>just a little</i> of your time'
5. Give deference by using honourifics such as Sir or Mr	'Can I help you, <i>Sir</i> '
6. Use formal word choices to indicate seriousness and to establish social distance	'Could you tolerate a slight imposition on my part?'
7. Apologize: admit the impingement, express reluctance	' <i>In am sorry</i> to bother you, but ...'
8. Impersonalize the speaker and hearer by avoiding the pronouns 'I' and 'you'	'Is it possible to request a favour?'
9. Use the past tense to create distance in time	' <i>I had been</i> wondering if I could ask a favour'
10. State the face-threatening-act as a general rule	' <i>Regulations require</i> that I ask you to leave'

terms positive and negative refer not to good or bad, rather to rituals of approach (positive) and avoidance (negative) respectively. Durkheim (1915/1965) used the terms to describe rituals of approach and avoidance toward sacred, religious entities. Goffman (1967), deeming the human personality to comprise a 'sacred' object in modern society, held that throughout daily interaction humans continually express ritual attitudes of either avoidance or approach toward the public personas of others. More recently Brown and Levinson (1987) operationalized negative and positive politeness relative to specific language elements.

These negative and positive politeness 'tactics' are illustrated in Tables 1 and 2. Negative tactics (Table 1) function by recognizing or establishing social distance between speaker and hearer. Thus apologies (no. 7) such as 'Excuse me', 'Pardon me', 'Sorry to bother you, but ...' convey interpersonal avoidance through acknowledgement of intrusion into the psychological territories of the other. Verbal hedges (no. 2 'Could I *maybe* ask you a question?', 'I *wonder* if you could ...?', 'Will you give me a moment, *if it's not too much trouble*?') enable speakers to avoid committing themselves to the intent of their own speech act, thereby distancing themselves from the act (Lakoff, 1972; Fraser, 1975). Use of the past tense when the present tense is grammatically and pragmatically correct (no. 9: '*I was thinking* of asking if I could borrow your car'.) moves the speaker's intent 'as if' into the past, thereby moving the infringement on the hearer's autonomy 'as if' into the future (Fillmore, 1975; Lakoff, 1974). Use of honourific terms (no. 5; *Dr, Mr Smith, Professor Williams, Ms Jones*) elevates the hearer's status, thereby creating an aura of respect and of social distance that in turn cushions the impact of an FTA.

In contrast to non-infringement and avoidance, positive tactics work through insinuation or establishment of a sense of commonality and familiarity. Positive tactic no. 1 entails a speaker suggesting that the hearer is admirable or interesting. To make this claim is to suggest that the speaker and hearer share something in common, and that on this basis they share an affiliative bond or some sort of camaraderie. Thus, a speaker may call attention to the hearer's qualities, possessions, interests, or wants: '*Gee, that's a really great looking jacket, mind if I borrow it sometime?*'; '*Louise you look lovely today, by the way ...*' Alternatively, speakers might draw upon 'in-group' speech forms, linguistic elements characteristic of speech among social intimates

Table 2. Tactics of positive politeness

Tactic	Example
1. Notice hearer's admirable qualities or possessions, show interest, exaggerate	'Nice to see you: hey really love your new car; can I borrow it sometime?'
2. Employ phonological slurring to convey in-group membership	'Heya, gimme a hand willya?'
3. Use colloquialisms or slang to convey in-group membership	'I know I seem like a <i>stick-in-the-mud</i> , but <i>what the hell</i> '
4. Use ellipsis (omission) to communicate tacit understandings	[Do you] 'Mind if I smoke?'
5. Use first names or in-group name to insinuate familiarity	'Hey Bud, have you gotta minute?'
6. Claim common point of view: speaker asserts knowledge of hearer's wants or asserts that hearer has knowledge of speaker's wants	'You know how the janitors don't like it when ...'
7. Give reasons: assert reflexivity by making activity seem reasonable to the hearer	'I'm really late for an important appointment, so ...'
8. Use inclusive forms such as 'we' or 'lets' to include both speaker and hearer in the activity	' <i>We're</i> not feeling well, are <i>we</i> ?'
9. Assert reciprocal exchange or tit for tat	'Do me this favour, and I'll make it up to you.'
10. Give something desired—gifts, sympathy, understanding	'You look like you've had a rough week'

(Joos, 1962; Ervin-Tripp, 1972). Thus, tactic no. 2 counsels use of phonological slurring—standardized ways of incompletely enunciating words or work phrases ('Hey, *howz it goin?*, *gimme* a hand here, *willya?*; '*whutz* up?'). This speech pattern is typical of casual, informal, and intimate social contexts, or of attempts to invoke such contexts (Labov, 1972). Positive tactic no. 9 entails use of the inclusive form ('we', 'lets', or 'us'). By saying 'I see we made a mistake, didn't we/ when they really mean '*you* made a mistake', a speaker places himself and the hearer in the same role, suggesting they share a similar outlook and responsibility, and so functioning to soften the friction that might arise from one actor's performance of an FTA.

Politeness theory deems the positive tactics less polite relative to negative usage. This is because familiarity carries a risk of seeming presumptuous, a risk not present in the more circumspect negative tactics. Thus, 'Excuse me, sir, might I possibly ask you for a lift to the nearest intersection' and 'Hey man, far out, hey can I bum a ride?', are both polite forms. But each construction embeds different assumptions as to the nature of the shared social reality between speaker and hearer. The negative form acknowledges the existence of an imposition and directly tries to mollify such, while the positive form insinuates that due to the same underlying social solidarity there is no imposition.

Politeness and the discernment of power

Politeness theory posits that power, social distance, and the intrinsic severity of an FTA, are all predictors of just how much remedial linguistic work an individual will use. That is, speakers low in relative power, speakers who are in a socially distant as oppose to close relation, and speakers who voice relatively more severe face threats (asking to borrow U.S. \$100.00 versus \$1.00) are predicted to use greater amounts of politeness. The present study focuses on the variable of power as it specifically applies to superior–subordinate interaction in formal organizations. In

politeness theory there exists a framework well-suited for analyzing just how superiors' and subordinates' relative power is embedded in speech acts.

While superiors are not restricted from using politeness, it is suggested that subordinates use greater amounts of politeness. The logic as to why low power actors might take greater care in addressing the person (and thus the face) of superiors is fairly self-evident. Subordinates are careful not to offend or infringe on those upon whom they are dependent; power relations by definition imply dependency (Dahl, 1957). Politeness enables subordinates to demonstrate regard and circumspection when faced with possible intrusion into psychological territories of superiors. It is surely easy to imagine a subordinate saying to his or her boss: 'I was wondering if I might discuss the possibility of a small raise' rather than 'I want a raise'. One can realistically envisage far more laborious constructions, such as 'Excuse me, I'm really very sorry to bother you like this, but, I was wondering if I might have just a minute of your time. I have been wondering if I could possibly ask you sometime for just a small raise?'

The most basic method for assessing the politeness differentials relies upon native speaker judgments—intuitive appraisals as to the relative politeness present in a speech act. Prior research shows native speaker judgments to be a reliable gauge of politeness differentials (Clark and Schunk, 1980). Accordingly:

Hypothesis 1: Speakers low in power relative to their addressee will employ higher levels of politeness, as measured by intuitive judgments of overall politeness.

But politeness theory also presumes that individuals pay attention to specific cues in formulating their overall estimation of politeness, that there is a relationship between overall politeness and the presence of specific tactics. If one could chart the occurrence of positive and negative tactics, then use these measures to predict the judgment of overall level of politeness, one could determine just how individuals use the tactics in assessing and constructing the relative politeness of speech. Such a determination would have considerable theoretical value, for a central goal of politeness theory is to determine whether cultural assessments of politeness are rule-governed or whether they are more or less arbitrary. For instance, does the substitution of 'could' for 'can' ('*Could* I ask you a question?' versus '*Can* I ask you a question?') or the insertion of the hedge 'possibly' ('*Could* I *possibly* ask . . .?') represent a standard cue by which we recognize one statement to be more polite than another? Are utterances that include minimizers ('*Just a little* of your time') more polite because they contain terms that minimize the imposition, etc. Thus:

Hypothesis 2: The specific tactics of politeness will be significant predictors of the overall degree of politeness of a speech act.

Finally, as discussed above, due to the overall venturesomeness of positive politeness, these tactics are inherently more risky and thus less polite, in overall terms, relative to the negative tactics. Therefore:

Hypothesis 3: The tactics of negative politeness will prove to be stronger predictors of the overall politeness, in comparison to the positive tactics.

Note, prior studies (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Brown and Gilman, 1991; Fraser, 1990; Morand, 1996) support the notion that politeness varies as a function of power (H1). But most pertinent to the present article is the idea that discrete tactics form the building-blocks of power laden speech acts, and can be identified and separately analyzed. Thus Hypothesis 1, in this context, lays necessary groundwork for the testing of Hypotheses 2 and 3.

Methods

Procedure

Eighty-four subjects (forty male, forty-four female subjects, mean age = 24), all full-time university students, engaged in laboratory role plays calling for them to address individuals of either higher or lower organizational status. The role plays required subjects to perform an FTA, specifically a directive (Searle, 1969). Directives were constructed such that they could be realistically performed by either a high or low status actor. For example:

You have arrived at a company meeting, not yet started. When you arrived there were only a few seats left; you placed your coat on a chair then went to greet a friend seated several rows away. Upon returning, you find [name and organizational title of addressee] in your seat, your coat on the floor, and you see that there are no more seats left. You want your seat back. What will you say to this person?

The addressee in each role play was a hypothetical other, subjects imagined the addressee characteristics then enacted the role play 'as if' to this person. This device held characteristics of the addressee constant, for a live respondent might have confounded the speaker through unintended feedback/nonverbal cues. To avoid confounding due to gender the hypothetical other was always designated as male. Power was operationalized as formal organizational status. Instructions asked subjects to project themselves into scenarios calling for them to address hypothetical others either two levels higher or two levels lower in an organizational hierarchy. Each subject performed, in randomized order, all four role plays, but manipulation of status did not vary within subjects. Because status did not vary within subjects they were unaware that this was a manipulated variable, and consequently did not alter their speech based upon obvious demand characteristics. Thus, subjects read each role play, imagined what they would say in such a situation, then activated a tape recorder to speak their role. A check clearly indicated the manipulation of power to be effective. The tapes were then transcribed. The data thus consisted of transcripts of subjects performing four different directives toward persons of either higher or lower organizational status.

Measurement of overall politeness

Using a 5-point Likert scale, anchored at the low end by 'barely polite', at the high end by 'extremely polite', six native speakers of English judged all speech acts. The degree of politeness of each act was calculated as the mean score of all six judges, higher scores indicating greater perceived politeness. Cronbach's alpha was 0.85, indicating the judges' assessments of relative politeness were reasonably similar.

Measurement of politeness tactics

The author and a second coder independently coded the entire corpus of speech, noting the frequency of occurrence of each tactic. The tactics show variation across linguistic levels. Some consist of mere phonemes, while others involve entire words or phrases. Nevertheless, all of the indices can be defined well enough to allow reasonably accurate coding.¹ Interrater reliability was

¹ Specific operational definitions and examples of the tactics are available from author.

calculated using coefficient kappa (Jones *et al.*, 1983), a non-parametric measure of interrater reliability that takes into account agreements due to chance. The resulting reliability scores all exceeded 0.80.

Results

To test Hypothesis 1, a one-tailed t-test examined the difference between the high and low status groups relative to the overall politeness scores of utterances. Power had strong effect on the overall politeness of a request ($t = 8.39$, $df = 232$, $p < 0.0001$).² The means and standard deviations for the high power group were: means = 2.69, $S.D.$ = 0.74, and for the lower power group: means = 3.71, $S.D.$ = 1.1. Differences were in the direction predicted, speakers low in power relative to their addressee used significantly higher levels of politeness.³ A two-way ANOVA showed no main or interaction effects for gender.

Next, the overall politeness score assigned to each utterance was regressed onto each of the positive and negative tactics. Two regression models were used. The first contained only the indices of negative politeness. The second contained indices of positive politeness as well as indices of negative politeness. The regressions were run in this sequence because Hypothesis 3 suggested that an utterance's general level of politeness is more strongly affected by negatively than by positively polite speech.

Table 3 displays means, standard deviations, and correlations for the various tactics of positive and negative politeness. Table 4, presenting the results of the regression analyses, indicates that negative politeness tactics alone accounted for 59 per cent of the variance in the raters' judgements of overall politeness. Adding the indices of positive politeness to the model increased R^2 to 0.63. A test of the increment in R^2 revealed the increment of 0.04 to be significant ($F = 2.02$, df 10/208, $p < 0.05$, even though the magnitude of the increase was small. The beta weights in model 2 suggest that native speakers rely more heavily on cues of negative politeness than cues of positive politeness when judging the relative politeness of an utterance. Nine of 10 beta weights for the indices of negative politeness were statistically significant whereas only two of the 10 indices of positive politeness were significant. Thus I found strong support for Hypothesis 2, and Hypothesis 3 was supported as well.

Discussion

This article has imported linguistic research into the domain of organizational studies. The relatively recent emphasis on the social construction of organizations highlights the primacy of

² The number of speech analysed is less than the total number generated. Some speech acts did not fall into the category predicted to contain positive and negative politeness. For instance, some subjects chose not to utter the FTA at all. Other speech acts were 'off-record', that is, hints or ambiguous constructions which do not rely upon the discrete tactics for their construction (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 178–184). These other speech acts, while related to power in predictable ways, are beyond the scope of the present investigation, which focuses on the specific tactics of politeness.

³ While amenable to repeated measures of analysis of variance, given the robust results there was no need to control for within-subjects correlations. Indeed, separate tests for effects of power on politeness showed significant results within each scenario. (Scenario no. 1: $t = 3.2$, $p < 0.002$; Scenario no. 2: $t = 4.18$, $p < 0.0001$; Scenario no. 3: $t = 5.71$, $p < 0.0001$; Scenario no. 4: $t = 4.98$, $p < 0.0001$). It was necessary to aggregate the speech acts across scenarios for the regression analysis due to the relatively infrequent occurrence of some of the tactics.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for positive and negative politeness tactics

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	
1. Be conventionally direct	1.97	0.56																				
2. Hedge	0.45	0.64	0.20																			
3. Use subjunctive	0.46	0.57	0.00	0.09																		
4. Minimize imposition	0.28	0.54	0.23	0.13	0.19																	
5. Use honorifics	0.32	0.54	0.13	0.01	0.19	0.02																
6. Formal word choices	0.13	0.37	0.06	0.18	0.06	-0.01	0.07															
7. Apologize	0.97	0.64	0.14	-0.04	0.10	0.10	0.21	-0.04														
8. Impersonalize	0.13	0.40	0.16	0.23	0.08	0.15	0.07	-0.02	-0.15													
9. Use past tense	0.19	0.42	0.11	0.32	0.07	0.18	0.02	0.15	0.15	-0.04												
10. State FTA as general rule	0.04	0.19	0.03	0.10	0.07	0.06	0.09	0.05	-0.06	0.38	0.02											
11. Notice admirable qualities	0.20	0.54	0.03	0.02	-0.04	0.12	-0.16	-0.02	-0.13	-0.43	0.04	-0.08										
12. Phonological slurring	0.23	0.70	0.06	0.03	-0.02	0.15	-0.16	-0.06	-0.08	-0.28	0.03	-0.03	0.50									
13. Use colloquialisms	0.11	0.38	-0.09	0.02	0.03	0.13	-0.17	-0.10	-0.06	-0.06	0.01	0.00	0.25	0.45								
14. Use ellipsis	0.12	0.44	0.05	0.11	-0.02	0.16	-0.13	-0.10	-0.02	0.05	0.06	-0.01	0.29	0.45	0.23							
15. First name	0.21	0.41	0.04	-0.07	-0.04	0.01	-0.28	-0.03	0.10	-0.08	0.05	-0.10	0.30	0.30	0.17	0.24						
16. Common ground	0.17	0.47	0.08	0.27	0.14	0.19	-0.09	-0.02	-0.17	0.11	0.15	0.07	0.12	0.05	0.17	0.09	-0.09					
17. Give reasons	0.34	0.53	0.18	0.20	0.03	0.16	-0.13	-0.03	-0.04	0.08	0.08	-0.05	0.01	0.15	0.12	0.15	-0.11	0.31				
18. Use inclusive forms	0.01	0.11	0.08	0.22	0.04	0.01	-0.07	0.16	0.00	0.06	0.13	-0.02	0.03	-0.04	-0.03	-0.03	-0.06	0.20	0.07			
19. Assert reciprocity	0.03	0.16	0.12	0.06	0.06	0.12	-0.10	0.02	-0.08	-0.05	-0.07	0.11	0.24	0.10	0.03	0.02	-0.02	0.23	0.10	-0.02		
20. Give something desired	0.06	0.24	-0.04	-0.01	0.14	0.15	0.01	-0.03	-0.08	0.15	-0.10	0.14	0.12	0.26	0.23	0.22	0.02	0.12	0.10	-0.02	0.08	

Values of $r \geq 0.195$ are significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table 4. Regression of specific tactics of politeness on raters' overall judgments of politeness

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Beta	S.E.	Beta	S.E.
Be conventionally indirect	0.27§	(0.072)	0.23‡	(0.072)
Hedge	0.18‡	(0.067)	0.15†	(0.068)
Use subjunctive	0.07	(0.070)	0.05	(0.069)
Minimize imposition	0.28§	(0.075)	0.24‡	(0.075)
Use honourifics	0.57	(0.073)	0.66	(0.077)
Formal word choices	0.32‡	(0.104)	0.36§	(0.104)
Apologize	0.39	(0.063)	0.42	(0.064)
Impersonalize	0.38§	(0.108)	0.38§	(0.108)
Use past tense	0.28‡	(0.099)	0.23†	(0.099)
State FTA as a rule	0.39*	(0.219)	0.44†	(0.216)
Notice admirable qualities			0.16*	(0.084)
Phonological slurring			0.05	(0.071)
Use colloquialisms			-0.17	(0.115)
Use ellipsis			0.04	(0.097)
First name			0.39§	(0.106)
Common ground			0.37§	(0.093)
Give reasons			0.08	(0.078)
Use inclusive forms			0.02	(0.345)
Assert reciprocity			-0.05	(0.263)
Give something desired			0.09	(0.170)
R^2	0.59		0.63	
F	28.73		16.99	

* $p < 0.01$; † $p < 0.05$; ‡ $p < 0.01$; § $p < 0.001$; || $p < 0.0001$.

language behavior; politeness theory offers a unique window into the study of language in organizations. The results show that, in an experimental setting employing hypothetical others, subordinates generate more polite speech when performing a conversational act that may infringe or otherwise threaten a superior's face. The study further shows that politeness may be assessed relative to specifiable linguistic elements. The regressions indicate that speakers share common linguistic reference points in formulating and anchoring judgements of politeness. Polite language is thus envisioned as a finite menu of weighted tactics that users choose from, liberally or sparingly, as circumstances require. The tactics accounted for roughly 60 per cent of the variance in overall politeness. This is quite a powerful result, for it is unreasonable to expect that language, which is itself a set of codes and rules for their combination, could be entirely reduced to another, less complex set of codes and rules (namely, the frequencies of use of the positive and negative tactics).

While the palliative properties of the positive tactics appear weaker when compared to negatively polite speech, surely positive politeness is preferred over utterances that lack all politeness. Moreover, the relatively weak performance of the positive tactics may be related to the fact that positive politeness is at times used to signal condescension. For example, taking the liberty to say 'Hey there, really goodta seeya, by the way I needta ask a favor ...' may be perceived as an overly forward and presumptive expression (and may have been so perceived by the judges in this study).

There is little doubt that the behaviors produced also occur in real life. While the laboratory setting controlled for extraneous variables such as reaction of listener, social context, prior social relationship, thus enabling easy comparability across speech acts, future work should apply the paradigm to other contexts and in field settings. In real life various factors controlled for might

influence subjects' speech output, yet without negating the overall pattern of results. For instance, the distribution of politeness in live interaction might be moderated by the unique history of a given superior-subordinate dyad, by individual differences in a superior's interactional style (e.g., 'leader consideration'—Fleishman, 1973), or by sources of power other than formal authority (expertise, age, etc.).

Consider specific applications. The regression analyses of the tactics enables one to see beyond broad-based appellations such as 'deference behavior' or 'leader consideration'. It is now possible to discern and to measure how discrete indices are implicated in the social construction of broad forms of role orientation. The research thus contributes to work on influence tactics (Kipnis *et al.*, 1980; Yukl and Falbe, 1990). For instance, the tactic of 'ingratiation' is defined as 'use of praise, flattery, friendly behavior'. But prior research uses only self-report, not actual behavioral measures of ingratiation. It is plausible (and now testable) that politeness tactics may be bound up in the vocalization of ingratiation attempts.

Politeness may also contribute to an understanding of how organizational roles are reproduced on an ongoing basis. Theorists have increasingly emphasized how the flow of microbehaviors exchanged at the face-to-face level is implicated in the social construction and reproduction of organizations (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). A longitudinal mapping of the social distribution of politeness among members of an organization could be used to illustrate how overarching abstractions such as formal authority are replicated and reinforced through the flow of everyday behavioral minutiae.

The model and measures of politeness might also serve to operationalize processes of distortion in superior/subordinate communication. The distortion of communication in messages transmitted upwards in organizational hierarchies is a well established finding (Fulk and Mani, 1986; Jablin, 1979). Nevertheless, studies of distortion do not descend to linguistic levels of analysis to discern just how ambiguity and distortion enter into communication. But polite constructions are inherently less clear, more ambiguous (Lakoff, 1977; Leech, 1983), thus theoretically likely to play a role in communication failure. Consider: a manager might avoid the clear imperative 'have this report on my desk by three o'clock' because it is impolite and seemingly authoritarian in construction. Yet the substitute redressive construction (the more 'participative', 'democratic' construction)—'if you can, I'd like to be able to get that report sometime around three'—might prove so vague as to diminish the likelihood of the report actually being finished on time. Organizational researchers could thus draw upon politeness theory, analyzing transcripts of speech behavior to discover how specific communicative practices contribute to message distortion.

Moreover, given a knowledge of how power is enacted through language one can deduce how egalitarianism might be instanced in manners of speech, i.e., by more parity or symmetry in exchanges of politeness. Status-levelling, the reduction of power differentials among superior and subordinate actors, is crucial to programmes of worker involvement and employee participation. Of course, whether putatively egalitarian relations are indeed characterized by symmetric rather than asymmetric exchanges of politeness is an empirical question. The measurement tools necessary to address this important issue at a linguistic level of analysis now exist. The contributions of politeness to the study of status levelling, as well as to communicative distortion, go well beyond theoretical advancement, illustrating how politeness might wield real performance-related consequences for organizations.

One final application outside the context of power relates to the fact that speech is increasingly central to work itself. Labour in the post-industrial service and information economy increasingly manipulates not material goods, but symbols and information (Reich, 1992), including language. Studies of 'emotion work' in the service sector highlight the centrality of verbalization

to the work itself (Sutton, 1991; Hirschfeld, 1983). One might study the politeness (or lack thereof) in the speech of bill collectors (Sutton, 1991). Or one could investigate how airline stewardesses (Hirschfeld, 1983) use various tactics to control disgruntled, or to produce contented, customers. One might hypothesize that car or other salespersons draw heavily upon the indices of positive politeness in order to establish a bond of camaraderie or of social friendship between themselves and a potential customer.

The day is already here when we matter of factly verbally communicate with computers. Voice recognition software and computer synthesized voices are increasingly reaching the market in a variety of product areas. Of course, computers are (at least for now) of sheerly technical instrumentality, in that they possess no sense of how or why humans have feelings. Yet, many computers are already programmed to use politeness techniques in crude but highly effective ways: 'Welcome, John P. Smith, Please insert your card with the black stripe down'; 'Thank you for using AT&T'; 'Have a nice day'. How would we feel if computers did not employ these polite catch words that we by now have come to take-for-granted? Are these superfluous, mere interactional gratuities, or are they useful in buffering and mediating the emotional contingencies and fragilities of exchange relationships—even be they human-machine exchanges? Perhaps ominously, perhaps not, given specific knowledge of the application and weightiness of the specific politeness tactics, these indices might prove useful in devising expert systems that would enable computers to be more 'user friendly', to become more harmonious to the sensibilities of humans with whom they interface.

Conclusion

We cannot, do not, approach one another as machines or as objects having sheerly a technical instrumentality. The course of every work day encompasses interruptions, criticisms, requests, disagreements, etc. Face threatening, conflictual occasions are unavoidable. Speakers necessarily engage in remedial, linguistic work to deflect and to mitigate ensuing social friction. The present research illustrates how such interaction work is dependent on the relative status of interlocutors.

Why has organizational studies neglected streams of work in tradition of Bales and Goffman? and why has the study of language received scant attention in organizational studies? One reason may be methodological. Language is often perceived as amenable only to qualitative analysis. That is, in that language is considered a complex and infinitely plastic medium through which an endless array of meanings may be articulated, researchers presume language can be studied only through interpretive procedures. Researchers, being themselves expert users of language, are relied upon to interpret and to decode language behavior (e.g., Donnelon, Gray and Bougon, 1986; Gronn, 1983; Rosen, 1985). However valid, such an approach ignores a more recent body of sociolinguistic findings—namely, that in practice much speech behavior is repetitious, and that many discrete, quantifiable linguistic variables can be identified and reliably observed (Hudson, 1990). While infinitely variable in theory, in practice, in everyday discourse, language usage is often routinized and predictable. A simple example of this is found in the fact that while the vocabulary of the dictionary is quite large, only a small subset of words is used to accomplish most daily speech. As the present research has shown, politeness may also be represented relative to a subset of specifiable linguistic indices. This points the way to future applications in organizational studies, by showing how language is amenable to quantitative analysis.

References

- Bales, R. F. (1950). *Interaction Process Analysis: A Method for the Study of Small Groups*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.
- Bales, R. F. Cohen, S. P. and Williamson, S. A. (1979). *SYMLOG: A System for the Multiple Level Observation of Groups*, Free Press, New York.
- Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, T. (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality*, Doubleday, New York.
- Brass, D. (1993). 'Potential power and power use: an investigation of structure and behavior', *Academy of Management Journal*, **36**(3), 441–470.
- Brown, R. and Gilman, A. (1991). 'Politeness theory and Shakespeare's four major tragedies', *Language in Society*, **18**, 159–212.
- Brown, P. and Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Burrell, G. and Morgan, G. (1979). *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.
- Clark, H. and Schunk, D. (1980). 'Polite responses to polite requests', *Cognition*, **8**, 111–143.
- Dahl, R. A. (1957). 'The Concept of Power', *Behavioral Science*, **2**(3), 201–215.
- Donnellon, A., Gray, B. and Bougon, M. (1986). 'Communication, Meaning, and Organized Action', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **31**, 43–55.
- Durkheim, E. (1915/1965). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Free Press, New York.
- Ervin-Tripp, S. (1972). 'Sociolinguistic rules: alteration and co-occurrence'. In: Gumperz, J. and Hymes, D. (Eds) *Directions in Sociolinguistics*, Basil Blackwell, Cambridge, pp. 213–250.
- Exline, R., Ellyson, S. and Long, B. (1975). 'Visual behavior as an aspect of power relationships'. In: Pliner, P. (Ed.) *Advances in the Study of Communication and Affect*, Plenum, New York, pp. 21–52.
- Fillmore, C. J. (1975). 'Santa Cruz lectures on deixis', *Indiana University Linguistics Papers*, Indiana University, Bloomington.
- Fleishman, E. A. (1973). 'Twenty years of consideration and structure'. In: Fleishman, E. A. and Hunt, J. C. (Eds) *Current Development in the Study of Leadership*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale.
- Fraser, B. (1975). 'Hedged performatives'. In: Cole, P. and Morgan, J. (Eds) *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 3, Speech Acts, New York, pp. 187–210.
- Fraser, B. (1990). 'Perspectives on Politeness', *Journal of Pragmatics*, **14**(2), 219–36.
- French, J. and Raven, B. H. (1959). 'The bases of social power'. In: Cartwright, D. (Ed.) *Studies in Social Power*, University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, Ann Arbor.
- Fulk, J. and Mani, S. (1986). 'Distortion of communication in hierarchical relationships'. In: McLaughlin, M. L. (Ed.) *Communication Yearbook 9*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, CA, pp. 483–510.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Doubleday, New York.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, Anchor Books, Garden City, NY.
- Goffman, E. (1983). 'The Interaction Order', *American Sociological Review*, **48**, 1–17.
- Goody, E. N. (Ed.) (1978). *Questions and Politeness, Strategies in Social Interaction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Gronn, E. (1983). 'Talk as the work: the accomplishment of school administration', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **28**, 1–21.
- Hare, A. P. (1976). *Handbook of Small Group Research*, (2nd ed.), Free Press, New York.
- Hinings, C. R., Hickson, D. J., Pennings, J. and Schneck, R. (1974). 'Structural conditions of intra-organizational power', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **19**, 22–44.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The Managed Heart*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Howard, A. (1995). 'High-involvement leadership', *Executive Excellence*, **12**(9), 11–22.
- Hudson, R. A. (1990). *Sociolinguistics*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Ibarra, H. (1993). 'Power, social influence, and sense making: effects of network centrality', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **38**(2), 277–303.
- Jablin, F. M. (1979). 'Superior–Subordinate communication: the state of the art', *Psychological Bulletin*, **85**, 1201–1222.
- Jay, P. (1965). 'Field studies'. In: Schrier, A., Harlow, H. F. and Stollnitz, F. (Eds) *Behavior of Nonhuman Primates: Modern Research Trends*, Academic Press, New York, pp. 525–592.

- Jones, A., Johnson, L., Butler, M. and Main, D. (1983). 'Apples and oranges: an empirical comparison of commonly used indices of interrater agreement', *Academy of Management Journal*, **26**(3), 507–519.
- Joss, M. (1962). *The Five Clocks*, Harcourt Brace, New York.
- Kanter, R. (1977). *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Basic Books, New York.
- Kipnis, D., Schmidt, S. and Wilkinson, I. (1990). 'Intraorganizational influence tactics: explanation in getting one's way', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **65**, 440–452.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Lakoff, R. (1972). 'Language in context', *Language*, **48**(4), 907–927.
- Lakoff, R. (1974). 'What you can do with words: politeness, pragmatics and performatives', In *Berkeley Studies in Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 1, Chapter XVI, Institute of Human Learning, University of California, Berkeley, p. 155.
- Lakoff, R. (1977). 'Woman's language', *Language and Style*, **10**(4), 222–248.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*, Longman, New York.
- Lee, M. and Ofshe, R. (1981). 'Impact of behavioral style and status characteristics on social influence: a test of two competing theories', *Social Psychological Quarterly*, **44**(2), 73–82.
- Leffler, A., Gillespie, D. and Conaty, J. (1982). 'The effects of status differentiation on nonverbal behavior', *Social Psychological Quarterly*, **45**(3), 153–161.
- Lewin, K., Lippitt, R. and White, R. (1939). 'Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created social climates', *Journal of Social Psychology*, **10**, 217–299.
- Mazur, A. (1983). 'Hormones, aggression, and dominance in humans'. In: Svare, B. (Ed.) *Hormones and Aggressive Behavior*, Plenum, New York.
- Mehrabian, A. (1972). *Nonverbal Communication*, Aldine, Chicago.
- Mintzberg, H. (1973). *The Nature of Managerial Work*, Harper & Row, New York.
- Morand, D. (1996). 'Dominance, deference and egalitarianism in organizational interaction: a sociolinguistic analysis of power and politeness', *Organization Science*, **7**(5), 544–556.
- Reich, R. (1992). *The Work of Nations*, Vintage Books, New York.
- Ridgeway, C. (1984). 'Dominance, performance, and status in groups: a theoretical analysis'. In: Lawler, E. (Ed.) *Advances in Group Processes*, Vol. 1, JAI Press, Greenwich, Conn., pp. 59–93.
- Rosa, E. and Mazur, A. (1979). 'Incipient status in groups', *Social Forces*, **58**, 18–37.
- Rosen, M. (1985). 'Breakfast at Spiro's: dramaturgy and dominance', *Journal of Management*, **11**(2), 31–48.
- Schermerhorn, J. and Bond, M. (1994). 'Upward and downward influence tactics in managerial networks', *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, **8**(2), 147–158.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Slater, P. E. (1955). 'Role differentiation in small groups', *American Sociological Review*, **20**, 300–310.
- Sutton, R. (1991). 'Maintaining norms about expressed emotion: the case of bill collectors', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **36**, 245–268.
- Ting-Toomey, S. (Ed.) (1994). *The Challenge of Facework: Crosscultural and Interpersonal Issues*, SUNY, Albany, NY.
- Yukl, G. and Falbe, C. M. (1990). 'Influence tactics in upward, downward, and lateral influence attempts', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **75**, 132–140.