



POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Politeness plays a crucial role in maintaining social harmony, professional credibility, and intercultural understanding within academic contexts. Academic communication—both written and spoken—is guided by institutional conventions and face-sensitive norms that vary across disciplines and cultures. This paper investigates politeness strategies in academic communication, focusing on how scholars, teachers, and students use linguistic and pragmatic devices to balance authority, humility, and collegiality. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, Leech's (2014) Interpersonal Rhetoric, and Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse model, this study analyzes examples from academic writing, email exchanges, and classroom discourse. Findings suggest that successful academic communication depends on employing strategies of positive and negative politeness to maintain clarity and respect. The paper concludes with pedagogical implications for developing pragmatic competence among non-native speakers of English in academic settings..

Introduction

In academia, communication is not only about conveying information but also about negotiating relationships, power, and identity. Whether in research papers, conference interactions, or classroom discussions, academic communication is shaped by a balance between asserting expertise and showing respect. Politeness, as a pragmatic phenomenon, ensures that participants maintain harmony and uphold academic decorum.

However, the norms of politeness vary across disciplines, linguistic traditions, and cultures. For instance, English academic writing favors directness and clarity, whereas Asian academic cultures often value indirectness and deference. In multilingual contexts, misunderstanding politeness conventions can lead to perceptions of rudeness or incompetence, even when unintended.

Therefore, understanding politeness strategies in academic communication is essential for effective participation in global academia. This paper explores how politeness operates in academic writing, email communication, and spoken academic interactions, with special reference to cross-cultural variation and the challenges faced by non-native English speakers.

Literature Review

1. The Concept of Politeness

Politeness is traditionally understood as behavior that maintains the social equilibrium and face of interlocutors. Goffman (1967) introduced the notion of face as the public self-image that individuals claim for themselves. Building on this, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed the Face-Saving Model, distinguishing between positive face (desire for approval) and negative face (desire for autonomy).

Politeness strategies mitigate potential face-threatening acts (FTAs) such as criticism, requests, or disagreement. Academic communication, with its critical evaluations and hierarchical relationships, is especially sensitive to such threats.

2. Leech's Interpersonal Rhetoric

Leech (2014) developed the Interpersonal Rhetoric Model, proposing that politeness operates as a communicative constraint guiding how speakers express attitudes. He identified maxims such as tact, modesty, and agreement, all of which are salient in academic interaction. For instance, using hedging ("It seems that...") fulfills the modesty maxim by softening claims.

3. Politeness in Academic Writing

Academic discourse involves a tension between authority and humility. Hyland (2005) observed that expert writers manage this balance through metadiscourse markers—hedges, boosters, and attitude markers. For example, "It appears that the data suggest..." demonstrates caution and respect for opposing views, embodying academic politeness.

Mauranen (1993) found that Finnish academic writers, when writing in English, often omit hedging, resulting in overly assertive tones. Such findings show how cultural norms affect perceptions of politeness and professionalism.

4. Politeness in Academic Speech

Spoken academic discourse, including seminars, presentations, and supervision meetings, involves interpersonal negotiation. Holmes (1995) and Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei (1998) show that successful speakers employ politeness strategies like compliments, mitigation, and inclusive pronouns ("we" instead of "you"). These choices signal collaboration rather than competition.

5. Intercultural Dimensions

Scollon and Scollon (2001) highlight that Western academic culture emphasizes deference politeness (independence) while Asian contexts value involvement politeness (respect and harmony). Misalignments between these systems can lead to intercultural miscommunication, especially in English-medium universities.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, integrated with Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse framework.

Concept Application in Academic Context

Positive Face Establishing solidarity with readers/listeners (e.g., "We all know that...")

Negative Face Respecting autonomy and avoiding imposition (e.g., "It might be argued that...")

Hedging Softening claims (e.g., "It seems," "It may be suggested")

Boosting Strengthening claims (e.g., "clearly," "undoubtedly")

Deference Showing respect to authority (e.g., “With due respect to previous studies...”)

This hybrid framework allows analysis of linguistic strategies that encode politeness across written and spoken academic registers.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative discourse analysis approach. Data includes:

40 research article introductions (English linguistics and applied linguistics),

60 academic emails between professors and students,

20 transcribed segments from classroom discussions and conference sessions.

Analysis focuses on identifying linguistic devices used to manage face needs, categorized according to Brown & Levinson’s politeness strategies and Hyland’s metadiscourse taxonomy.

Analysis

1. Politeness in Academic Writing

Academic writers employ politeness through hedging (to reduce imposition) and boosting (to assert confidence).

Examples:

Hedging: “It seems that the results indicate a correlation...”

Boosting: “This clearly demonstrates that...”

Hedging protects the writer’s negative face by avoiding overcommitment. It also allows space for alternative interpretations, aligning with the cooperative principle in scholarly dialogue.

Writers also use self-mentions (“we argue that...”) and inclusive pronouns (“our study suggests...”) to involve readers politely. Excessive self-promotion is considered impolite in academic genres, hence mitigated by collective voice.

2. Politeness in Academic Email Communication

Email has become a dominant mode of academic interaction. Politeness here depends on formality, structure, and opening/closing formulas.

Typical Structure:

Greeting: “Dear Professor Smith,”

Softened request: “I was wondering if you could...”

Appreciation: “Thank you for your time.”

Closing: “Best regards.”

Non-native speakers often struggle with this style. Direct requests like “Send me the article” may sound rude, while native norms favor mitigation (“Could you please share...”). Studies (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011) confirm that lack of pragmatic awareness leads to misperceived rudeness.

3. Politeness in Spoken Academic Discourse

In seminars or conferences, speakers manage politeness through turn-taking, acknowledgment, and evaluative comments. For example, prefacing disagreement with a positive comment (“That’s a valuable point, but...”) softens criticism and preserves face.

Supervisory meetings between professors and students illustrate hierarchical politeness. Students often use negative politeness (“If it’s convenient, could we meet next week?”), while supervisors use positive politeness to encourage (“You’ve made excellent progress”).

Discussion

Politeness strategies in academic communication are discipline- and culture-specific. In Anglo-American contexts, politeness is expressed through linguistic mitigation—hedging, indirectness, and formulaic courtesy. In collectivist or high-context cultures (including Central Asia), politeness is shown through status acknowledgment, indirect compliments, and gratitude expressions.

Gender also influences academic politeness. Studies (Tannen, 1990) show that women tend to use more supportive feedback and hedges, while men employ assertive tones. However, in academic settings, such differences are increasingly convergent due to institutional norms promoting equality.

Politeness contributes to:

Academic credibility (writers who balance confidence and humility gain trust),

Collaboration (maintaining collegial tone encourages teamwork),

Conflict avoidance (politeness mitigates critical discourse).

In multilingual universities, misunderstanding politeness markers can create barriers. For example, Uzbek students writing to British professors may overuse formal titles (“Dear Respected Professor Dr. Smith”), which, though polite in Uzbek norms, sounds excessively deferential in English. Hence, intercultural training is vital.

Pedagogical Implications

1. Integrating Pragmatics into Academic Writing Courses:

Students should learn rhetorical moves (e.g., hedging, boosting) as politeness strategies, not merely stylistic features.

2. Teaching Email Etiquette:

Instruction should emphasize pragmatic softeners, appropriate greetings, and closings.

3. Raising Cross-Cultural Awareness:

Workshops comparing English and Uzbek academic politeness norms can reduce miscommunication in international academic contexts.

4. Feedback and Power Dynamics:

Supervisors and teachers can adopt positive politeness to create supportive feedback cultures, encouraging learner confidence.

Conclusion

Politeness is central to academic communication because it maintains the delicate balance between authority and humility. By employing strategies such as hedging, boosting, and deference, scholars signal intellectual respect and professional ethics.

However, politeness norms differ across cultures: English academic discourse values independence and equality, whereas Uzbek and other collectivist traditions prioritize respect and relational harmony. Understanding these variations is essential for global academic success.

Ultimately, pragmatic competence—the ability to use language appropriately according to context—must be taught alongside linguistic accuracy. Developing politeness awareness among students, researchers, and educators fosters effective intercultural communication and mutual understanding within the academic world.

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