Politeness strategies in email exchanges in Persian

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Abstract: Nowadays the use of email as a communicative device is very common among people. The present study focuses on the use of politeness strategies in email exchanges. This study attempts to find out what positive strategies are more frequently used by Iranian Persian speakers. For this purpose, a number of 60 emails exchanged between Persian speakers of both genders, with a fairly well ongoing relationship were collected. The use of "group identity markers" was found to be the most frequent positive politeness strategy, followed by the strategy "give gifts to H". Finally, implications of the findings are discussed.

Key words: email exchanges, CMC, politeness, Persian

1. Introduction

Social human beings rely heavily on interpersonal relationships for a smooth communication with each other. As such, politeness stands out as a vital communicative activity that tends to harmonize social interactions and foster interpersonal relations between the members of a society. The use of emails as a computer-mediated form of communication has served us for over decades. Email exchanges are now a well-established means of Computer Mediated Communication (hereafter CMC) in the world, by and large, and in Iran in particular. Email is known as an asynchronic form of CMC, by which e-interactants deliver and receive message over time (Vinagre, 2008).

Since the seminal work of Brown and Levinson on politeness (1978/87), the phenomena have received a great deal of attention. Although a number of politeness studies have challenged the notion of "face" as a cornerstone of Brown and Levinson theory in that it is Anglo centric, individualistic and that it is insufficient to be applicable to many non-western societies (Werkhofer, 1992; Matsumoto, 1988; Koutlaki, 2002; Watts, 2003; Mills, 2003), some aspects of the theory are still viable for politeness studies, especially in CMC context.

Drawing upon Brown and Levinson theory of politeness, the present study aims at tracing linguistic politeness strategies in email exchanges among a group of male and female participants in Persian. Particularly, it investigates the positive politeness strategies, proposed by Brown and Levinson in the emails that have been exchanged over a period of one year among a selected group of Iranian speakers of Persian. To this purpose, the study poses the following research question:

Which one(s) of the positive politeness strategies is (are) more common in email exchanges of Iranian speakers of Farsi?

As the power and social distance between the participants are too low, the possibility of +P strategies to be employed is very high. On the other hand, using negative politeness is very rare among intimate friends. Other strategies were not considered in the study, because the scope of this study is very limited.

Since one of the main criticisms of Brown and Levinson model is that it has focused on western languages and culture, this study could be significant in that it is done in Persian. Farsi is language spoken in Iran as an official language and is a native language of the majority of the population. This study can introduce some of the ways to be positively polite in Persian and hence could help fostering cross cultural communication.
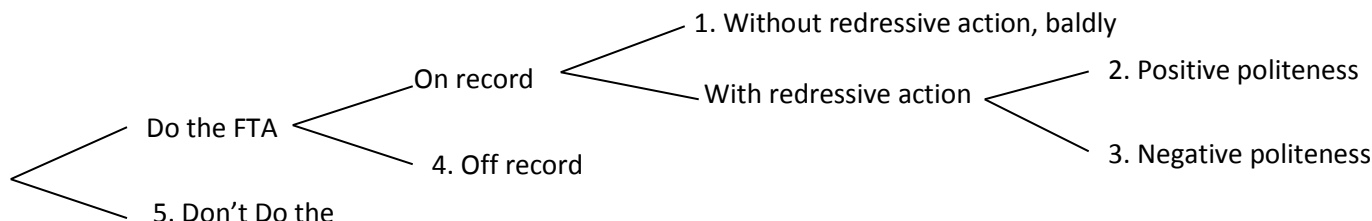
2. Theoretical framework

The model of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) provided the framework for data analysis. This model revolves around the concept of face (Goffman 1967), which is defined as the public self-image that all members of the society have and seek to claim for themselves. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that this image consists of two related aspects: negative face

(freedom from imposition i.e. the desire for freedom from impingement) and positive face (the desire to be appreciated and approved of, i.e. the desire to be wanted). Positive politeness strategies address other's positive face wants, whereas negative politeness strategies address their negative face by showing distance and impersonality. Thus, in successful social relationships, people cooperate by maintaining face in interaction and, therefore, participants attempt to preserve their self-image at the same time as they try not to damage the image of others. There are some

speech acts that intrinsically threaten the speaker/sender's or hearer/ recipient's positive or negative face, and is called Face Threatening Acts or FTAs.

Thus asking for help poses a threat to the recipient's negative face, whereas refusing to help poses a threat to the requester's positive face. In these situations, the sender of the needs to employ linguistic relations of politeness strategies in order to avoid, or at least minimize, the potential face thereat. Brown and Levinson (1987) summarize these strategies as below.

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                                              ┌─ 1. Without redressive action, baldly
                          On record ──────────┤
                          │                   └─ With redressive action ──┬─ 2. Positive politeness
            Do the FTA ───┤                                               │
            │             └─ 4. Off record                                └─ 3. Negative politeness
 ───────────┤
            └─ 5. Don't Do the
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According to Brown and Levinson, all participants in communicative interaction tend to use the same types of strategies in similar circumstances. Roughly speaking, the more dangerous the particular FTA is, the more the speaker tends to choose the higher numbered strategy. Therefore for those FTAs whose potential threat is minimal, the sender(s) will use strategy number one (on record, without redressive action, baldly), whilst the most dangerous ones should not be realized at all (do not do FTA).

According to Brown and Levinson, in order to assess the seriousness of an FTA we need to consider the following factors: 1) the social distance (D) of the Speaker (S) and Hearer (H), 2) the relative power (P) of S & H, 3) the absolute ranking (R) of the impositions within the particular culture. Thus, the weightiness of an FTA is calculated as follows:

$$W x = D (S, H) + P (H, S) + R x$$

Where Wx is the numerical value that measures the weightiness of the FTAx, D (S, H) is a measure of the power that H has over s and Rx is a value that measures the degree to which the FTAx is rated as an imposition that culture.

Thus, social distance (distant relations versus close relations) is understood to be high among people who do not know each other or are relatives strangers. Their behavior is fundamentally impersonal and formal and, therefore, characterized by the mutual use of negative politeness strategies. Low social distance, on the other hand, refers to relationships between friends in which communication essentially displays positive politeness strategies (mutual interest and common ground, in group language, cooperation and reciprocity). Power (superior/ subordinate relationships) refers to dependency relations between the participants in interaction. Thus, subordinates (low power in individuals) tend to use mostly negative politeness when addressing more powerful participants in

order to avoid impinging on them, whereas high power individuals tend to use negative politeness less and positive strategies rather more with their subordinates, power relations are, therefore, defined by their asymmetry in terms of politeness, whereas more equal relations are defined by their asymmetry.

In order to analyze and identify the strategies found in e-mails, we followed Brown and Levinson's (1987) classification. We have given each positive politeness (+P) strategy a code in order to facilitate understanding.

P+1 Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods)
In general this output suggests that S should take notice of aspects of H's condition (noticeable changes, remarkable possessions, anything which looks as though H would want S to notice and approve of it.

P+2 Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)
This is often done with exaggerate intention, stress, and other aspects of prosodic, as well as with intensifying modifiers.

P+3 intensify to H
Another way for S to communicate to H that he shares some of his wants is to intensify the interest of his own (S'S) contributions to the conversation, by 'making a story'. This is a common feature of positive politeness conversations, as it pulls H right in to the middle of the events being discussed, metaphorically at any rate, thereby increasing their intrinsic interest to him.

P+4 Use in group identity marker
By using any of the many ways to convey in group membership, S can implicitly claim the common ground with H that is carried by that definition of the group. These

include in group usage of address forms, of language or dialect, of jargon or slang, and of ellipsis.

P+5 Seek agreement

Seek agreement another characteristic way of claiming common ground with his to seek ways in which it is possible to agree with him. The raising of 'safe topics' allows S to stress his agreement with H and therefore to satisfy H's desire to be 'right', or to be corroborated in his opinions.

P+ 6 Avoid disagreement

Token agreement. The desire to agree or to appear to agree with H leads also to mechanisms for pretending to agree, instances of 'token' agreement.

P+ 7. Presuppose/ raise/ assert common ground, Gossip, small talk

The value of S'S spending time and effort on being with H, as a mark of friendship or interest in him, gives rise to the strategy of redressing or FTA by talking for a while about unrelated topics. This strategy for softening requests - at least, requests for favors – is commonly used in all kinship societies.

P+8 Jokes

Since jokes are based on mutual shared background knowledge values, jokes may be used to stress that shared background or those shared values. Joking is a basic positive politeness technique. For putting H a 'tease'

P+9 assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants

One way of indicating that S and H are cooperators, and thus potentially to put pressure on H to cooperate with S, is to assert or imply knowledge of H's wants and willingness to fit one's own wants in with them.

P+10 Offer, promise

In order to redress the potential threat of some FTAS, S may choose to stress his cooperation with H in another way. He may, that is, claim that (within a certain sphere of relevance) whatever H wants, S wants for him and will help to obtain offers and promises are the natural outcome of choosing this strategy; even if they are false. (I'll drop by some time next week) they demonstrated S's good intentions in satisfying it is positive-face wants.

P+ 11 Be optimistic:

The other side of the coin, the point- of- view flip that is associated with cooperative strategy, is for S to assume that H wants S's wants for S (or for S and H) and will help him to obtain in them.

P+12 Include both S and H in the activity

By using an inclusive "we" form, when S really means 'you' or 'me', he can call upon the cooperative assumption and thereby redress FTAs.

P+13 Including H in the activity

This is another aspect of including H in the activity is for S to give reason as to why he wants what he wants. By including H thus in his partial reasoning, and assuming flexibility (H wants S's wants), H is there by led to see the reasonableness of S's FTA (or so S hogs.) in other words, giving reasons, is a way of implying "I can help you" or "you can help me" and assuming cooperation, a way of showing what help is needed.

P+14 Assume or assert reciprocity

The existence of cooperation between S & H may also be claimed or urged by giving evidence of reciprocal rights or obligations obtaining between S & H.

P+ 15 Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy understanding, cooperation)

Finally S may satisfy H's positive face wants (that) S wants H's wants, to some degree) by actually satisfying some of H's wants.

3. Method

A number of 60 emails exchanged between fairly intimate friends and from 30 to 40 years of age written in Persian by 25 Iranian speakers of Persian (both genders) were collected for analysis. Based on the classification of positive politeness strategies in Brown and Levinson's model of politeness, each email text was broken into its constituent positive politeness strategies as in the following example.

Zoie jan salam (p + 4).
salam midooni ke man computer nadaram.(P +7) ba computer doostam tahghigh dars general linguistics ra type kardam vali computresh ghat zade va hame chiz ke type karde boodam paride rooy(P+13)/(P+7) cool disk ham hanooz narikhteh boodam (P+ 13) dast neveshtehamam door rikhtam (P+ 13) forsat ham nadaram (P+13) mitoonam azat(P + 4) bekham(P+4) ke az rooy jozve to(P+4) 1 chizi copy conam be ostad (P + 7) bedam. bad joor gir oftadam, vaghean nemidoonam chikar konam. rasti mobilam ghate . montazere emailet hastam (P+ 4) (P+11) mer30

4. Findings and discussion

As table shows strategy number 4 is the use of in group identity markers. In this study this strategy is the most frequent, and it is almost common in all data. Farsi is a T/V system language. The T pronoun is an indicator of positive politeness strategy as were found in many of the e-mails in this study. Another way to use the strategy 4 is the use of endearments which were quite common in the sample data. The word joonam (dear) and azizam (dear) were the most common endearment words found in greeting sections of e-mails from friend. Jan means darling and dear is a very

common type of showing in group identity marker to appear positive politeness in Persian.

Instances of this strategy were often found in the data to show that sharing some common knowledge and concern between the participants of interaction is one of the causes for positive politeness. For example:

General baray hafte dige chizi ghofte? (lit. General for week next anything?) (has the teacher assigned any homework for General Linguistics for next week?)

Strategy	Number	percentage
P+1	3	1.33%
P+2	24	10.71%
P+3	1	
P+4	98	43.75
P+5	0	0
P+6	0	0
P+7	49	21.87%
P+8	11	4.91%
P+9	1	0.44%
P+10	3	1.33%
P+11	5	
P+12	3	1.33%
P+13	6	2.67%
P+14	0	0
P+15	35	15.62
total	224	-

In this example the speaker presupposes that the hearer knows that general refers to the (general linguistics), she also presuppose that the hearer knows the lecturer of the course so she doesn't mention the lecture's name.

Another strategy which is more frequent is give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation). In Iranian culture greeting is very important in contrast with other e-mails from other languages and cultures, and if any one starts his/her e-mail without greeting he/she considered as rude. And it is common to attend to the hearer's interest by mentioning the name of all family members. For example as was evident in the present study greetings were not confined to saying just "hello" and "how are you?" in most cases the e-mailers extended their greetings to "how is Kimia?", "how is Majid?" (family members).

Joking and teasing is quiet common among friends as a positive politeness strategy, although it comprised only 4.91% of the data. This strategy, however, not surprisingly, was not found between interactants with high social distance. The reason could be the sensitivity and the potential threat of joking to the addressee's face when interactants do not know each other well and hence the risk of using this strategy is extremely high.

Give reason is another frequent strategy and was found mainly in requests and refusals. Those two are FTAs, e-mailer gave reason to justify the requests and refusals and to mitigate the threat to the face of addressee. An interesting point about this strategy is about, as were found in the data, in some cases they gave more reason for a particular speech act.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to report on the most frequent positive politeness strategies employed by a group of Iranian Persian speakers in their email compositions to their close and fairly close friends. The results indicated that positive politeness strategy "group identity markers" and "give gifts to H" were the most dominant strategies in the email exchanges. It is hoped that the results could foster ways for intercultural computer mediated communication by introducing the commonest politeness strategies in Persian email exchanges.

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