

A pragmatic investigation of linguistic politeness and power relations in request emails

Richard L. Oandasan
Midway Colleges, Inc.
rloandasan@midwaycolleges.edu.ph

Abstract

Communication has evolved over the years. The advent of technology has mediated communication thus bringing about new media such as emails. This computer-mediated communication has continuously gained the attention of language scholars, and, more recently, most of the studies on emails analyzed politeness and impoliteness as marked by the appropriateness of the sender's language in various contexts. However, there seems to be a dearth of literature which analyzes emails in the workplace, especially in the Philippine setting. Hence, this study examined the presence (or the absence thereof) of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) positive politeness strategies and/or negative strategies in 86 emails sent by the employees to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a higher education institution. This study employed a quantitative-qualitative research design, and the findings indicate that there is preponderance of opening and closing moves, which reflects positive politeness strategies, and a salience of conventional indirectness with query preparatory, which demonstrates negative politeness strategies. In conclusion, this eclectic use of politeness strategies in workplace emails is not just a linguistic act, but, more significantly, it is a social act which depicts power relations among interlocutors. Accordingly, the discursive social practice such as writing emails is not just about exchanging information. More importantly, it reflects (re)negotiating communicative intentions within a continuum emphasizing solidarity and desirability on one end and mitigating impediment and imposition on one's act on the other.

Keywords: Politeness strategies, impoliteness, power relations, computer-mediated communication, request emails

1. Introduction

Computer-mediated communication has gained attention in second language literature in the recent years, and one of the various forms of communication which has significantly affected the world is email. Aside from being the most preferred, it has been an official means of communication in various institutions and organizations. Given that email functions as an official written form of discourse addressed to an authority, a more formal and epistolary style is expected. Likewise, in terms of language, a more structured and polite register must be adhered to in view of the professional context, especially in the workplace. To Alafnan (2014,

as cited in Shapiro & Anderson, 1985, p. 10), “email was a fundamentally new medium with significantly new characteristics that cannot be treated with the old rules alone.” Hence, in language classes, business correspondence or communication has been integrated in the curriculum to ensure that students who will become future professionals are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills in communicating via email.

With this, there has been growing interest in studying the diversity of email use; thus, it has been the focus of research particularly in academic settings. One of the earliest studies examined the use of emails in replacing supplementary lectures in psychology courses (see Smith, Whiteley & Smith, 1999). Bloch (2002) worked with his students in a graduate level ESL course and noted the rhetorical strategies the students employed in interaction outside the classroom. Chjenova (2013) examined the salutations, directness level, and syntactic, lexical, and external modification. In the said study, guidelines for writing emails to faculty are hardly available, and students are often unsure of which politeness strategies and language are appropriate. This observation was likewise shared by Hallajian and David (2014) who assert that there is still violation of email netiquette in institutionalized email communication, although it is widely deployed in academic settings. They further add that studies on email communication at university level have raised the issue that faculty members are not satisfied with students’ emails with an impolite tone. Evidently, in most of the studies conducted, emails were analyzed in light of politeness and impoliteness as marked by the appropriateness of the sender’s language.

In Malaysia, Alafnan (2014) investigated politeness in workplace emails in a Malaysian educational institute. Contrary to a previous research on Malaysian emails which reported the use of direct imperative or declarative politeness strategies, Alafnan’s study revealed the use of indirect positive and negative politeness strategies by Malaysian employees to establish rapport with the recipient. This finding suggests that social distance plays a more significant role than power imbalance as Malaysians are generally regarded as more polite with their distant colleagues than their close fellow workers.

In the Philippines, Correo (2014) explored politeness strategies used by Filipinos, particularly Bikolanos, in asynchronous computer-mediated discourse. Her study validated the applicability of Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) politeness theory in the local setting. It is parallel with Simmons’ study (1994) which affirms the universality of politeness; it also demonstrates the distinctiveness of Filipino, especially Bikol politeness, in terms of certain linguistic and cultural nuances. Employing a pragmatic lens, Suarez (2012) investigated politeness strategies in workplace emails. Anchored on Yule’s (1996) notion of politeness, the said study revealed that both positive and negative strategies, particularly indirectness, are employed in the sample emails since indirect illocutions are regarded to be more polite as they increase the degree of optionality. Due to low sample size, however, the findings seem not generalizable and lack a more nuanced analysis within a socio-cultural realm of how Filipinos communicate.

While there has been a plethora of studies on computer-mediated communication such as emails using the notions of politeness (see Brown and Levinson, 1978) and/or impoliteness (see Culpeper, 1996), there remains to be a dearth of studies on emails in the workplace in the context of non-native speakers (Alfanan, 2014); let alone in the Philippine setting. Driven by this and the fact that the researcher is a constant recipient of emails, he

has seen an opportunity to analyze not just the grammatical aspect but, more importantly, the pragmatic component of the workplace correspondence he receives.

The primary aim of this study, therefore, is to examine the presence (or the absence thereof) of Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategies and/or negative strategies in sample emails sent by the employees to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the institution. The present study seeks to determine the politeness strategies employed in emails. The results obtained reflect power relations operating in a discourse community. Likewise, the study may pave the way for possible training opportunities for the employees to further enhance not just their written communication skills but, more importantly, their pragmatic competence. This paper argues that the ways people communicate are constrained by hierarchical structures and forces in social institutions in which the interactants live and function. Consequently, the conventions used for communication are (re)shaped ideologically as a result of power relations in an organization. The study primarily seeks to address the question of how linguistic conventions are shaped by the relationship of power in a particular social institution. Thus, the main question is: How does the relation of power in a social institution (re)construct linguistic conventions?

In this study, the linguistic conventions are gleaned from the politeness strategies used in selected emails written by employees and sent to the CEO of an academic institution. Specifically, the study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What politeness strategies are used in the request emails sent by the employees to the Chief Executive Officer?
2. What does the use of politeness strategies reveal about linguistic conventions?
3. What does the use of politeness strategies demonstrate about power relations?

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The two main theoretical frameworks which underpin this study are Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) and Norman Fairclough's notions of language and power (1989) which will be discussed thoroughly in the next section.

1.1.1 Brown and Levinson's Theory of Politeness (1987)

In contemporary pragmatics, one of the most well-researched area is politeness. O'Keeffe, Clancy, and Adolphs (2011) note Dufon et al.'s (1994) bibliography of politeness research which extends to 51 pages in small print. However, they argue that this is not even reflective of a comprehensive work on politeness theories in pragmatics. Meanwhile, Watts' (2003) bibliographical account contains 1, 200 titles and is continuously growing every week. This only proves the increasing popularity of and interest in politeness theory associated with Brown and Levinson who published *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use* (1978, reprinted 1987). Since the publication of their seminal work, the politeness theory has been the most influential model to date (O'Keeffe, et al., 2011). Likewise, there has been a growing literature on impoliteness advanced by Culpeper (1996) who explored a framework parallel to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to examine the communication of offence. To better

understand the intricacies and complexities which underpin these theories, it is critical to explore the foundations upon which they have been grounded: Grice's co-operative principle and Goffman's concept of face.

Mohammed and Abbas (2015) argue that the starting point of the theory of politeness is Grice's co-operative principle (CP). The CP states: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). Accordingly, when people communicate, they should adhere to the four maxims: *quantity* (saying only what is necessary), *quality* (saying what is true), *relation* (saying what is relevant), and *manner* (saying it briefly and orderly). It must be noted though that Grice was not expecting strict adherence to these maxims; in fact, he was more interested in the flouting (non-adherence) of these maxims thereby requiring some inferencing of the underlying meaning of utterances in a conversational context, which he later termed as *conversational implicatures*. In this case, it cannot be overemphasized that an utterance alerts the addressees or the hearers to the need to infer an implied meaning; otherwise, this might result in a communication breakdown.

While the above principle has been the leverage in developing the politeness theory, Brown and Levinson (1978), including Leech (1983), observe the deficiency in Grice's co-operative principle. They argue that the principle focuses only on one function of the language, which is highly referential, that is, merely giving or providing information without any consideration for politeness and its crucial role in facilitating the process of interaction. Hence, politeness is considered as a mere flouting of the maxim (Mohammed & Abbas, 2015). In fact, the third strategy, off-record politeness, means flouting one of the Gricean maxims on the assumption that the addressee can infer the intended meaning. For instance, "Would you rather show me your new iPad, please?" is a polite form for the co-operative request "I have learned that your mom bought you a new iPad. Show it to me!" The polite form generates an implicature that the owner might not be willing to show the new iPad given that the request is in an interrogative form as an indirect way of requesting. However, this flouts the maxim of manner in which the person is supposed to be brief, clear, and concise. Therefore, researchers of politeness attempt to fill the gap of Grice's account by focusing on the relational function of language (Barron, 2003).

Echoing Grice's notion that conversation is essentially co-operative in nature, Goffman (1967), in his seminal essay *On Face-Work*, developed the concept of *face* which is not necessarily the actual facial expression as in a smile but rather a face which is defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself or herself (p. 5)." Goffman's formulation of one of the key notions in politeness research, face, was based on his background in sociology whereas Grice's work was developed from a background in the philosophy of language. As explained by Goffman, the face, as an image of oneself, must be maintained based on social expectations concerned with pride, dignity, and honor. In the context of an interaction, this suggests that the participants must constantly be conscious of their actions and behavior which can either "save" or "lose" not just the face of the speakers but also the face of the hearers. As noted by Radford et al., (2011) in the *Library Quarterly* (2011) by the University of Chicago, this also means that people can be assigned different faces on different occasions of verbal interaction and that all social interactions are predicated on individuals' face needs, that is, they can never get away from negotiating facework. In situations in which

one participant needs to take particular care not to damage another participant's face, they will do everything to avoid any face-threatening act. This kind of facework is supportive. On the other hand, some situations sanction the display of face-threatening which is aggressive face-work. In other words, people exert a certain degree of effort to maintain a positive self-image by investing in emotional energy in the face they present to others – a process termed by Goffman as *face-work*. The metaphor of face initially posited by Goffman was expanded by Brown and Levinson (1987) who maintain that face “is the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for him/(her)self” (p.61). They further categorize the face into two: positive and negative. The former is the need for the enhancement of positive self-image – the need to be appreciated and liked by others while the latter is the need for freedom of action and freedom from imposition – the need to be free and independent from actions imposed by others. In short, both categories highlight the same essential needs – the need of people to be liked – and these impact their linguistic behavior. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), these needs can be satisfied by politeness super strategies such as bald-on record, positive politeness, negative politeness off record, among others. These are the communicative choices which the interlocutors can make when confronted with a face-threatening act (FTA) – “a communicative act performed by the speaker that does not respect either the hearer's need for space (negative face) or their desire for their self-image to be upheld (positive face) or both” (O'Keefe et al., 2011, p. 64). In essence, these super strategies are meant to soften the adverse effects (save the face, so to speak) of FTAs.

1.1.2 Norman Fairclough's Language and Power

Power, as defined by Simpson and Mayr (2010), emanates from “a privileged access to social resources such as education, knowledge and wealth. In turn, access to these resources provides authority, status, and influence, which is an enabling mechanism for the domination, coercion, and control of subordinate groups” (p.2). However, Simpson and Mayr (2010) argue that power is more than just about domination for it is “jointly produced” by members of society – both the dominant and the subordinate groups – for people think that dominance is legitimized in some respect.

Over the years, the interest has been in how “powerful” (dominant) groups influence the way language is used and how they exercise control over the use of language. Conversely, this interest has shifted to how the “ordinary” (subordinate) group exercises and contests the discursive power using various language strategies. This paradigm of how power is viewed is situated closer to Foucault's (1977, 1980) theoretical model for the analysis of power in discourse which was summarized by Simpson and Mayr (2010) below:

Foucault sees the concept of power as *productive* (as opposed to the usual notion of being repressive), as a complex and continuously evolving web of social and discursive relations. For example, instead of assuming that a powerful person in an institutional setting is in fact all powerful, Foucault argues that power is more a form of action or relation between people which is negotiated and contested in interaction and is never fixed or stable. So, Foucault does not regard power as an already given entity which is maintained

through the ideological operations of society (p. 3).

Foucault's dynamic view of power is somehow parallel to Fairclough's constitutive view of power in relation to language. In his book *Language and Power*, Fairclough (1989) strongly asserts that "language connects with the social through being the primary domain of ideology, and through being a both site of, and a stake in, struggles for power" (p. 15). With this claim, the connection among language, ideology, and power is highlighted.

This implies that language, as a social or discursive practice, is neither a separate entity nor an external phenomenon outside society. Language is very much shaped and influenced by ideology – ways in which a person's belief, opinions, perspectives, perceptions, value systems, and general ways of understanding the world within a web of political beliefs and socio-cultural practices. The concept of ideology is integrally allied to the idea of power. Ideology, as a set of "common-sense" assumptions, is embodied in institutional practices specifically in linguistic conventions. Consequently, it legitimizes existing power relations. For instance, the linguistic convention for a traditional type of consultation between a doctor and a patient embodies a rather "common-sense" assumptions which underlie authority and hierarchy – the doctor is an expert about medicine while the patient lacks knowledge about it; the doctor is in a position to identify the cure for a particular ailment and the patient is not; and, finally, the doctor should make the decisions and thus can control the entire discourse of the consultation. These assumptions, also termed by Fairclough (1989) as ideologies, are embedded in the forms of language used or linguistic conventions. The doctor-patient consultation also illustrates that ideology is very much linked to language because it is the most common form of social behavior which is usually based upon "common-sense" assumptions.

Fairclough (1989) also provides adequate explanation about the connection between language use and unequal relations of power specifically in modern Britain. Accordingly, he gives justice to the rich and complex interrelationships of language and power which he claims not to be thoroughly expounded by linguists, especially those who are working in sociolinguistics (working on language in its social context). To him, sociolinguistic conventions have a dual relation to power. First, the way language is used in discourse incorporates differences of power. Secondly, these sociolinguistic conventions "arise out of – and give rise to – particular relations of power" (p. 2) – this being the focus of his book. This second focus highlights that those existing conventions are outcomes of power relations and power struggle. When talking about relations of power, these are not only reducible to class relations for there are other power relations between other groupings such as men and women, young and old, and other ethnic groupings which are not specific to certain institutions. However, there are also power relations between social groupings in institutions. In the context of this study, this pertains to the power relations between an employer and the employees. Fairclough's notion of power relations is premised as frequent relations of *struggles* – a term which he uses in a technical sense to refer to "the process whereby social groupings with different interests engage with one another. Social struggle occurs between groupings of various sorts - women and men, black and white, young and old, dominating and dominated, groupings in social institutions, and so on" (p. 34). As Fairclough reiterates, this kind of struggle also applies to language for it is both a site of and a stake in class struggle and

those who enact and exercise power through language must always be involved in struggle with others to defend (or lose) their dominant position. In sum, the exercise of power, in contemporary society, is increasingly achieved through ideology and, more particularly, through the ideological mechanisms of language in this linguistic epoch.

Using the notions of language and power as advanced by Fairclough, this study shares the practical objective of raising consciousness of exploitative social relations by focusing on language. This means helping people to see the extent to which their use of certain strategies in communicating underlies linguistic conventions, the extent to which they rest upon common-sense assumptions, and the ways in which these common-sense assumptions can be ideologically shaped and, consequently, construct power relations.

While studies related to computer-mediated communication such as email using the notions of politeness (see Brown and Levinson, 1978) and/or impoliteness (see Culpeper, 1996) abound, there remains to be a dearth of analysis of emails in the workplace particularly in the Philippine setting. Moreover, there is paucity in literature which employs the notion of language and power (see Fairclough, 1989) along with the theory of politeness to unmask the power relations operating in a discourse community. As a pragmatic investigation and as a novel contribution to the field of language studies, this paper attempts to demonstrate the interface between two theoretical frameworks, politeness theory and notion of language and power, in examining request emails in the context of an educational institution. Consequently, this frame of analysis aims to unpack how the relation of power in a social institution may (re)construct linguistic conventions.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The dataset in this study was analyzed using the quantitative-qualitative research design. The analysis began with the reading of each email to obtain an over-all impression of the data. The second reading entailed a quantitative analysis of the linguistic features for it utilized frequency counting and tabulation methods with specific attention to three components: (1) opening sequences and forms of address; (2) level of directness in the head-act as evidenced using modals and declaratives/performatives (adapted from Chejnova, 2014); and (3) closing strategies (adapted from Hallajan and David, 2014). The third reading focused on the analysis of the 15 positive politeness strategies and 10 negative politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987).

For the qualitative aspect, the researcher attempted to deepen the analysis by further explaining the reasons for the common patterns and the prevalent linguistic conventions revealed by the data. Further, in evaluating and interpreting the data, the immediate context which includes the processes of the request email production and the larger context which involves social conditions and structures and the social effects they bring was considered. This frame of analysis, to some extent, is anchored in Fairclough's (1989) critical approach to language studies in which he posits that:

... in seeing language as discourse and as social practice, one is committing

oneself not just to analysing texts, nor just to analysing processes of production and interpretation, but to analysing the relationship between texts, processes, and their social conditions, both the immediate conditions of the situational context and the more remote conditions of institutional and social structures (p. 26).

Therefore, the analysis was not just an attempt to describe the linguistic patterns revealed by the request emails as in the case of pragmatic studies. More importantly, the method employed was an exploration of the power relations which constitute linguistic conventions in institutional email requests to unmask ideologies.

2.2 Data Collection Procedure

The primary data used for this study were workplace emails from selected teaching and non-teaching staff of a Philippine higher education institution. The staff who render auxiliary services (canteen personnel, service masters, etc.) were excluded for they do not have access to emails. The selected employees belong to the director level or the middle management level for they typically send email correspondences to the CEO. The researcher sought written permission to use the emails of requests from the concerned employees. After securing consent, the researcher sought the written approval of the CEO to utilize the emails sent to him for research purposes only. The emails included in the dataset have met the following conditions:

- a. must be in the form of requests which aim to seek approval from the CEO;
- b. must be in English;
- c. should have been sent within this period: 1st semester, AY 2018-2019; and
- d. must be initiated by the employees themselves, not a response to another correspondence.

The request emails were particularly selected for this study for several reasons. First, *request* as a speech act has gained considerable attention in pragmatic investigations and has been defined in several ways (Ho, 2018). Secondly, studies on request emails concerning the use of pragmatic politeness in students' requests emails sent to the faculty have grown over the years (see Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Chejnova, 2014; Motallebzadeh et al., 2014; Hallajian & David, 2014; Savic, 2018). Thirdly, while there have been several studies which used emails as a data corpus in general, studies which utilize workplace request emails in an educational setting remains insufficient. Finally, making a request via emails plays an important role in the workplace not just to get things done but also to serve as a vehicle to strengthen relationships among employees and to demonstrate professionalism and effective communication skills. Consequently, this serves as an enabler for establishing harmony in the workplace.

As Ho (2018) points out, requesting may be viewed by professionals as a rather repetitive task; nevertheless, Ho emphasizes that making a request in the workplace should be taken seriously for three reasons: (1) it is a high stake act in which a request properly done

can result in request compliance; (2) the request act challenges and damages the relationship between the two parties; and (3) a well-constructed email request is beneficial for the requestor for it builds desirable personal identities and establishes stronger rapport with the requestee.

Initially, there were 94 emails provided to the researcher, but after a careful review of each e-mail, the researcher excluded eight (8) emails for they hardly met the conditions to be part of the dataset (e.g., emails were dated 2016, addressee was not the CEO; email was about acceptance of resignation, etc.). Thus, the final dataset was trimmed down to just 86 emails.

2.3 Data Analysis

This study employed three layers of analysis of the corpus. The first layer of analysis focused on the linguistic features which include the opening and the closing sequences. As this study is a pragmatic investigation of linguistic politeness, the second layer of analysis determined the politeness strategies using Brown and Levinson's (1978) notion of politeness. In both layers of analysis, frequency count and percentage distributions were used to account for the most common linguistic features and politeness strategies reflected in the emails. In the final layer of analysis, the notions of power relations in relation to the linguistic conventions derived from the use of politeness strategies were examined using a qualitative approach. Accordingly, the quantitative data were substantiated by the appropriate textual analysis of the corpus using the notion of language and power advanced by Fairclough (1989).

3. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the linguistic features, i.e., opening sequence and greeting forms, the level of directness in the head-act, the pre-closing (thanks) sequence, and the complimentary close and the politeness strategies, both negative and positive, seen in the emails. Also, the linguistic conventions gleaned from the use of politeness strategies and their possible relationship with the notion of power relations will be elucidated.

Table 1 shows the distribution of opening moves used in the emails. Based on the data, 57% of the participants use greeting such as *good day* or the typical term of deference *dear* + the form of address which is *sir* while 36% start their email requests with the form of address only, i.e., the use of *sir*. The remaining 6% use greetings only and 1% have neither any greeting nor any form of address.

Table 1
Distribution of opening moves in the emails

Opening Strategies	Examples	No. of emails	Percentage
Greeting/term of deference + form of address	<i>Good day/Dear Sir</i>	49	57%
Form of address only	<i>Sir</i>	31	36%
Greetings only	<i>Good evening! Good day!</i>	5	6%
No address nor greetings		1	1%
Total		86	100%

In terms of closing strategies, most of the sample emails have a complimentary close, that is, 90% (77 out of 86 emails) while 10% do not have any complimentary close at all. For emails with complimentary closes, the analysis revealed that the widely used complimentary close is *respectfully/respectfully yours* obtaining 74% (57 out of 77) and that 26% (20 out of 77) use *sincerely or sincerely yours*. For emails with no complimentary close, the phrase *noted by* or *prepared by* is used instead.

In addition, 59% (51 out of 86 emails) use pre-closing moves by thanking the requestor. Conversely, 41% do not have any pre-closing move such as the use of *thank you/thank you very much*. Table 2 summarizes the distribution of closing moves used in the emails.

Table 2
Distribution of closing moves in the emails

Closing Strategies	Examples	No. of emails	Percentage
Pre-closing	<i>Thank you./Thank you very much.</i>	51	59%
	<i>Respectfully/Respectfully yours/</i>	77	90%
Complimentary close	<i>Sincerely/Sincerely yours</i>		

Generally, the results for opening and sequencing moves presented in Table 2 are hardly surprising because the use of greetings and a term of deference in a letter as well as the closing are conventionalized forms. These forms are usually introduced in schools specifically in business letter writing courses. The high frequency of occurrence of opening and closing moves coincides with the findings of Bou-Franch (2011) and Hallajian and David (2014). In these studies, the findings revealed a preponderance and variations of forms of address, greetings, and closing in Spanish email conversations and Iranian post-graduate students' requests emails, respectively.

It must be noted though that more than linguistic conventions, the use of the term of deference *sir* as part of the opening moves and the use of *thanks* as a pre-closing, are strategies to mitigate the face-threatening acts to the negative face of the addressee (the CEO

in the case of this study) though this may mean damage to the negative face of the requestor (the employees in the case of this study). By expressing thanks, the requestors seem to be succumbing to the power of the hearer or the addressee. Despite this, the requestors still use pre-closings such as *thanks* to mitigate imposition. This is parallel with the case of the Iranian students in Hallajian and David's (2014) study which accounted for 63% of emails with pre-closing.

On the other hand, the use of *sir* without a name as a form of deference as well as any form of greeting (as in the case of 36% of the emails) cannot necessarily be misconstrued as impolite or imposing. Rather, it may be viewed as a strategy to preserve linguistic conventions associated with the use of salutation. Also, it is intended to maintain the formality of the discourse and to establish connection with the addressee as opposed to including the first name together with the term of deference to reduce the power distance from the addressee. Conventionally, this is typical in a horizontally-oriented communication setting. In the Filipino culture, the students have always been trained to address persons in authority (mostly teachers) using *ma'am* or *sir*. It would be considered impolite for students, for instance, to address their teachers by their first names. It would even be more impolite if no appropriate greeting is made at all. However, in other cultures, this is not the case, just like in Iran where Iranian students use informal addresses in their emails to their professors; they use the first names more often than the surnames or the last names (Hallajian & David, 2014). Hence, in this study, the participants' use of form of deference can be gleaned not just as a form of conformity with conventions but also as a demonstration of politeness within a dynamic social discursive practice.

The other linguistic feature analyzed in this study is the level of directness of head-acts in requests. Chejnova (2014) asserts that requests are innately conflict-producing. Accordingly, they pose threat on the dignity of the addressees because of the high expectations for them to act on the request such as but not limited to performing a specific task, granting permission, and approving a request. The results obtained from Chejnova's study of Czech students' request emails confirm that of Obenbergerova (1992) which says that Czech requests are more direct in comparison with English requests. In Chejnova's (2014) study, the emails were expressed in more direct forms (57.3% of emails analyzed) with a prevalence of hedged performatives (31.9%).

Table 3 indicates the directness level of head-acts. Out of the 86 emails, 42% (36 out of 86 emails) are conventionally indirect through the use of a query preparatory as a request strategy while 32% (28 out of 86 emails) are indirect through the use of hints + performatives, yielding the highest frequency in this category.

On the one hand, only 26% (20 out of 86 emails) reflect directness strategies such as performatives (8%), want statements (6%), expectation statements (5%), hedged performatives (4%), imperatives (2%), and need statements (1%).

Table 3
Level of directness of the head-acts

Directness Level	Request Strategies	Frequency Count	Percentage N=86
Most direct	Performatives	7	8%
	Want statements	5	6%
	Expectation statements	4	5%
	Hedged performatives	3	4%
	Imperatives	2	2%
	Need statements	1	1%
	Direct quotations	0	0%
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory (permission)	36	42%
	Query preparatory (ability, willingness)	0	0%
	Query preparatory (availability)	0	0%
	*Hints + performatives	17	20%
	*Hints + imperative	8	9%
	Hints	3	3%
Direct		22	26%
Indirect		64	74%
Total		86	100%

**These two additional request strategies were included as they have been observed to be prevalent in the data.*

Among the conventionally indirect request strategies, the query preparatory (42%) yielded the highest frequency. Accordingly, it consists of a question (modal) and a hint + a performative as in the sample request emails below. (Note: Some parts of the email were left blank to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.)

1. Query Preparatory (permission)

REF. NO. : HR-C-E-47-18

DATE : June 5, 2018

Dear Sir:

This is to forward the request of _____ regarding the return of work of our School Dentist, _____, DDM this June 2018.

Thus, may we also request to include her professional fee in our payroll? As approved, her monthly honorarium is Php _____.

Please see attached request letter and approved honorarium fee.

2. Sample Hint +Performatives

REF. NO. : CMO-020-18

DATE : 19 April 2018

Dear Sir:

Please be informed that the installation of two split type floor mounted Aircon unit in the library area is ongoing. In line with this,

I am requesting your permission to release an amount of _____ as labor payment to finish the project. Listed below is the detailed breakdown of expenses.

This is for your comment and approval.

In Email 1, it is evident that the requestor is indirect when they use a query preparatory strategy specifically by phrasing the request through a question using the modal *may*. Structurally, the use of question form lessens the imposition. Also, the lexical choice *may* rather than *can* sounds more polite and less demanding. To some degree, this linguistic choice saves the negative face of the addressee by softening the imposition.

Similarly, the request in Email 2 is also indirect, although it is more direct than the request in Email 1. The indirectness can be gleaned from the hint or reason for the request as reflected in the first sentence: *Please be informed that the installation of two split type floor mounted Aircon units in the library area is ongoing.* This is followed up by a rather more direct performative *I am requesting your permission to release an amount* which has some degree of indirectness through the use of the word *permission*. With this linguistic choice, the decision to act resides in the addressee. To some extent, this also indicates the kind of power struggle at stake in this discourse for the accomplishment of the goal intended by the speaker lies in the action to be performed by the addressee.

However, it is interesting to note that 26% are rather direct in their request emails. This directness is reflected in their linguistic choices such as the use of performatives (8%), wants statements (6%), and expectations statements (5%). The high frequency of directness, as gleaned from the linguistic choices by the users, is likewise observed in previous studies (see Obenbergerova, 1992; Ogiermann, 2009; Wierzbicka, 2003; Chejnova; 2014). The following emails illustrate directness in the senders' requests:

3. Performative

REF. NO. : CMO-068-18

DATE : 04 September 2018

Dear Sir:

I am respectfully submitting the quotations sent thru email of Mr. _____, President, MDCS Mechanical Design and Control System, regarding the laboratory equipment for BS Mar-e Program specifically the Hydraulic Electro Hydraulic Trainer with an amount of _____.

This is for your comment/approval.

4. Imperatives

REF. NO. : HR-C-E-44-18

DATE : May 28, 2018

Dear Sir:

This is to formally endorse the request of Ms. _____ to stay in our dormitory. **Kindly see attachment** for the letter of request.

Emails 3 and 4 appear rather to be direct through the linguistic choices in boldface. The use of on-bald politeness strategy or a more direct strategy in the above emails seems justifiable in so far as the theoretical positions of Brown and Levinson (1989). Based on the politeness theory, the use of on-bald strategy happens when there is a sense of urgency in the request. In the context of the emails above, both requests required immediate attention and action by the addressee. In Email 3, the requestor is asking for the comment on/approval of the addressee of an equipment purchase which is badly needed. In Email 4, the requestor formally endorses the request of a new faculty member to stay in the dormitory. There is urgency here since the faculty had to transfer before the start of the school year (that was in June 2018). In both emails, the requestors use the direct strategies not necessarily to be deliberately impolite or to curtail the freedom of the addressee. It may be surmised that the use of direct strategies is intended to facilitate the understanding of the addressee of the nature of the request, and, therefore, it makes it easy for him to immediately act on the request. In this case, the requestors deviate from the typical lengthy introductions to easily and quickly convey their message.

The third component of analysis is the use of positive politeness and negative politeness strategies, which aids in identifying the common patterns constituting linguistic conventions as shaped by relations of power.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), positive politeness is a redress directed to the addressee's positive face, their desire that their wants should be thought of as desirable. Redress is a compensatory type of politeness strategy meant to reassure that the addressees are approved despite face threatening acts. In other words, one employs positive politeness to increase one's sense of desirability and belongingness. Based on the data in Table 4, there

is a total of 197 instances of positive politeness strategies in the request emails with giving reasons (90%), being optimistic (45%), being inclusive (33%), and noticing to hearer (29%) as the top four. It must be noted that the instances of positive politeness strategies (197) are higher than the number of emails (86) since some of these strategies occur several times in a single email.

Table 4
Positive politeness strategies in the emails

Request Strategies	Frequency Count	Percentage
Give (or ask for) reasons	77	90%
Be optimistic	39	45%
Include both S and H in the activity	28	33%
Notice, attend to hearer (H)	25	29%
Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants	8	9%
Presuppose/raise/assert common ground	6	7%
Offer and promise	6	7%
Avoid disagreement	5	6%
Seek agreement	2	2%
Assume or assert reciprocity	1	1%
Exaggerate	0	0%
Intensify interest to H	0	0%
Use in-group identity makers	0	0%
Joke	0	0%
Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)	0	0%
Total	197	

Email 5 provides an evidence in which the participant employs various positive politeness strategies in performing a speech act via a written discourse:

5. Positive Politeness Strategy
REF. NO. : STO 11-18
DATE : MARCH 14, 2018

Sir,

This is to inform your **good office** that the available schedule given by 2go Group, Inc. is on April 11, 2018, 1600H. They will be departing from MMFI by April 11, 2018, 0930H. As of today there are 114 students from BSMar-E, BSMT and CSHRS who made their reservation in our office. Also, **please** be informed that bus transportation fee increased due to price hike of petroleum products. In connection to this, our training fee worth _____ will increase to _____. **May we request** that the accounting office start collecting _____ each for the training fee, accommodation, food, transportation and miscellaneous fees and the Sickbay department to be responsible for the medical details of the trainees.

Hoping for your kind consideration.

Thank you.

First, the lexical choices *sir*, *good office*, and *please* are means of recognizing the positive face of the addressee. Second, the details or the reasons for the request are well-articulated to justify the actions to be done by the requestor. For request emails, this seems to be a dominant pattern of establishing the common ground and context between the requestor and the addressee. Thirdly, the use of pronoun *we* in the excerpt suggests inclusivity, which increases the sense of belongingness, an integral component of saving one's positive face. In addition, the use of the third person pronoun *we* suggests a collaborative connection of strengthening relationship between the requestor and the addressee. The statement *Hoping for your kind consideration* indicates being optimistic that the request will hopefully be granted, and, therefore, it reduces the chance of disapproval which may be a face-threatening act on the addressee's positive face.

As Brown and Levinson (1987) pointed out, a positive FTA is an act that manifests the speaker's negative assessment of the hearer's positive face. It also pertains to an element of the speaker's positive face such as expressions of disapproval, contradictions, disagreements, or challenges. Accordingly, the disapproval by the addressee may be perceived by the requestor as undesirable and, therefore, it might damage the reputation of the requestor. In the case of the above excerpt, the use of positive politeness strategies in the request email reflects the requestor's desire to increase desirability, which may contribute favorably to the approval of the request by the addressee.

Notably, the other strategies of positive politeness such as exaggerating, intensifying interest to the addressee, joking, and giving gift are not used at all. First, these strategies are usually employed in spoken discourse and rarely in written discourse. Secondly, these strategies are more informal, and, as such, they are often used in informal settings or

contexts. In this study, the context is more formal given that the communication transpires in the workplace. Thirdly, these strategies are deemed inappropriate when there is power distance between the interlocutors.

On the other hand, negative politeness is a redress strategy aimed at the addressee's negative face. This is based on the premise that the addressee wants to have their freedom unhindered and their attention unimpeded. In short, one uses negative politeness to mitigate impediment and imposition on one's act.

Table 5 presents the frequencies of negative politeness strategies in request emails analyzed in this study. Although the difference is not significant, it may be inferred that there are less negative politeness strategies than positive politeness strategies used. Based on the data, there are 182 occurrences of negative politeness and to 197 instances of positive politeness.

Table 5
Negative politeness strategies in the emails

Request Strategies	Frequency Count	Percentage
Give deference	85	99%
Be conventionally indirect	48	56%
Minimize the imposition	45	52%
Hedge	2	2%
Impersonalize S and H	2	2%
Be pessimistic	0	0%
Apologize	0	0%
State the FTA as a general rule	0	0%
Normalize	0	0%
Go on record	0	0%
Total	182	

Based on Table 5, the top three negative politeness strategies used are the following: giving deference, being conventionally indirect, and minimizing the imposition. Other rare strategies used are hedge and impersonalize speaker and hearer. Strategies such as being pessimistic, apologizing, stating the FTA as a general rule, normalizing, and going on record are not used at all probably because they do not fit the context of the request speech act and are not suited for a written discourse being sent to a person in power.

In the study of Chejnova (2014), Standard Czech is typically used in formal written communication. It is particularly used in situations in which the producer uses negative politeness strategy. Hence, the more formal, standard type of written communication, as in the case of emails in Czech, should begin with deferential form of address with some amount of syntactic modification to minimize imposition. This is in consonance with the results of

this study as evidenced by the high percentage of giving deference (99%) as a negative politeness strategy in the dataset. The syntactic modification in Chejnova's study is somehow parallel with the use of conventional indirectness in the request emails as reflected in the use of modals, interrogative formats, and a variety of hedging and performatives. Email 6 below illustrates how negative politeness strategies are employed in a notification of resignation sent to the CEO by the human resource head of the institution:

6. Negative Politeness Strategy
REF. No. : HR-C-E-018-18
DATE : February 8, 2018

Dear Sir:

_____, our contractual welder has given his written notice to leave our institution last February 5, 2018. Although this is short notice, he verbally informed the undersigned last February 1, 2018. His last day is on February 9, 2018.

The following are the reasons _____ gave:

1. He wants to focus on his review so that his dreams of being a seafarer will be realized;
2. He will immediately start the processing of his documents to go onboard.

He **sends his apology** for not being able to finish his contractual arrangement up to March.

Sir, it is best to let him go since it is the institution's dream too that our students pursue to be onboard.

I have already talked to Arch. Sanglay and **he will assist us** in looking for a replacement for _____. **The replacement will only have a contract with us for one month.**

Thankyou.

Respectfully yours,

The sample email contains several negative politeness strategies used. First, giving deference to the addressee is done using an appropriate opening move *dear sir* which is later reinforced in the third paragraph. Secondly, the email is conventionally indirect for the action to be performed by the addressee is implicit. In the institution, resignation is accepted and approved by the CEO. In the sample email, there is no explicit imperative on what the addressee must execute upon receipt of the email. Similarly, it may be surmised that the requestor is very cautious so as not threaten the addressee's positive face of wanting to retain employees, especially those who are considered as assets of the institution. Thirdly, it is also apparent that the requestor tries to personalize the email sent to the receiver through this

statement: *Sir, it is best to let him go since it is the institution's dream, too, that our students pursue to be onboard.* Evidently, it can be surmised that the use of negative politeness strategies in the email reflects the requestor's attempt to mitigate impediment and imposition on the addressee's possible acts upon receipt of the email.

In the same statement, a positive politeness strategy is employed by asserting or presupposing the requestor's knowledge of and concerns for the addressee's want – to make sure that every academic completer is onboard for them to put into practice the theoretical knowledge they have acquired. This deliberate choice was not to take the employee attrition against the requestor who is supposed to take care of the manpower of the institution. This is a strategy to save not just the negative face of the addressee but also the positive face of the requestor. Finally, the use of the pronoun *it* takes away the focus from the requestor and the addressee and shifts the emphasis to the act of acceptance of the resignation.

In Email 6, the use of negative politeness strategies and being indirect throughout the email suggest that the linguistic choices are not necessarily influenced by simple adherence to conventionalized forms but, to a greater extent, are shaped by the kind of relationship that the requestor has with the addressee. Further, the linguistic conventions here are products not just of the linguistic resources available to the requestors but also an outcome of power relations with the addressee.

In summary, the findings indicate a wide variety of politeness strategies employed in the request emails sent to the CEO of the institution. In terms of the opening and the closing moves, there is a high percentage of uses of greeting/term of deference (e.g., *Dear Sir*) and complimentary close (e.g., *sincerely, respectfully, truly yours*). As far as the level of directness on the head-act is concerned, the findings show that the request emails are conventionally indirect. Accordingly, these are characterized by a high frequency of strategies such as query preparatory (asking permission) and a hint + performatives. This high level of indirectness does not only demonstrate a linguistic act through the use of a polite form of co-operative request but also reflects a social act by preserving professional relations and reducing the impositions to maintain positive and negative concepts of face of both the requestors and the addressee.

Likewise, the findings reveal that positive politeness strategies such as giving reasons, being optimistic, being inclusive, and noticing to hearer, among others are employed more frequently in most of the request emails. The requestors' linguistic choices which demonstrate these strategies reflect their attempt to save the addressee's positive face by reducing the distance between them. In essence, they reflect how the interlocutors in the institution increase one's sense of desirability, belongingness, and supportive workforce through the positive politeness strategies in their request emails.

The high frequency of negative politeness strategies such as giving deference, being conventionally indirect, and minimizing the imposition is noted in most of the sample emails. This finding suggests a pervading linguistic convention in the institution in which the requestors try to keep the addressee's negative face by valuing his/her personal territory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and recognizing his/her position in the institution. In truth, it demonstrates how the interlocutors in the institution mitigate the impediment on one's act by utilizing negative politeness strategies. These negative politeness strategies are deemed as less threatening because they sound less demanding. Consequently, they lessen the imposition on the addressee to immediately act on their requests.

Finally, relative power may be gleaned from the discourse which transpires between the powerholder or the dominant party (addressee or the CEO of the school) and the subordinate party (the requestors or the employees) through computer-mediated communications such as request emails. This highlights how existing conventions, whether the presence or the absence of it, are outcomes of power relation. As Brown and Levinson (1987) put it, the speaker considers the relative power of the hearer, defined as “the degree to which the hearer can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of the speaker’s plans and self-evaluation” (p. 77). In the case of this study, the high usage of politeness strategies in request emails is suggestive of the careful consideration of the addressee’s (the hearer) possible actions and/or response/s to the requestors’ (the speakers) intent in relation to their relative position and the company.

4. Conclusion

The primary aim of this study is to explore how power relations (re)construct linguistic conventions in an academic institution. It is argued that the ways people communicate are constrained by hierarchical structures and forces in social institutions in which the interactants live and function. Accordingly, linguistic conventions are ideologically constructed by the power relations as manifested in discourses.

The eclectic use of politeness strategies and the various ways by which they are employed in computer-mediated communication is not necessarily a shift from becoming impolite to being polite and vice versa. It only confirms that the way people communicate and their selection of politeness strategies are changing. In addition, it is worthy to emphasize that power relations, social distance, and degree of imposition constrain communicative actions, but the relevance of these factors must be situated within a particular context in which discursive practices are deployed.

Moreover, linguistic conventions revealed through the use of politeness strategies relate to a larger socio-cultural context in which language is regarded as a system of practice commonly termed as *habitus*. In relation to language as a *habitus*, poststructuralists such as Bourdieu (1982) believe that language is not just a closed system of grammar and patterns but an open system which includes a set of practices always being challenged to account for the symbolic power of particular ways of communicating, dealing with interlocutors, and other social constructs such as race, gender, ethnicity, and organizational hierarchy. In other words, language is not an autonomous or independent system, but rather it is a system shaped by social conditions that allow for its existence and influenced by certain practices of its social actors (Duranti, 2009). Finally, this view echoes Foucault’s notion of power as *productive* (as opposed to the usual notion of being repressive) and as a complex and continuously evolving web of social and discursive relations.

To some degree, the use of politeness strategies in workplace emails is not just a linguistic act but, more significantly, a social act which depicts power relations among interlocutors. Accordingly, the interlocutors, in engaging in a discursive social practice such as writing emails, are not just exchanging information but, more importantly, they

are constantly (re)negotiating communicative intentions within a continuum emphasizing solidarity and desirability on one, and mitigating impediment and imposition on one's act on the other end.

Pedagogically, the findings of this study can find space in the classrooms where language teachers can systematically integrate and explicitly teach politeness and impoliteness strategies to develop learners' pragmatic competence. For instance, in writing classes, language educators may teach the students not just the format, guidelines, and mechanics of composing and responding to emails but also the associated netiquettes and politeness strategies to be observed as courtesy to the recipients. Likewise, the teachers may present to their classes good and bad sample emails and allow the students to critique them vis-à-vis the various (im)politeness strategies. As a reinforcement activity, the teachers may ask the students to rewrite poorly written emails and employ politeness strategies as a means to improve them. Through these activities and strategies, the students will develop a heightened sensitivity to appropriate use of language particularly in computer-mediated communication. The nuances of the linguistic features in computer-mediated communication such as email correspondences will not only increase grammatical awareness but will also heighten discourse competence among the learners. More importantly, the results related to notions of power have far implications for a critical pedagogy in which learners are provided with opportunities to interrogate societal issues such as cyberbullying, discrimination, inequalities, and inequities among others through language. Consequently, this kind of pedagogy can cultivate learners' sociolinguistic competence which is more attuned to sensitivity to the use of language within social, political, economic, and cultural contexts.

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Dr. Richard L. Oandasan is the incumbent Academic Director of Midway Colleges, Inc. Cabanatuan, Nueva Ecija. He is also a part-time academic staff at the University of Santo Tomas, Faculty of Arts and Letters, Department of English. He obtained his degree, Master of Arts in Education major in Language Education, at the University of the Philippines, Diliman Campus. He obtained his post-graduate degree, Doctor of Philosophy in English Studies (Language), in the same university as a Full Graduate Scholar of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). He has been a facilitator, lecturer, speaker, participant, and travel grantee in local and international conferences in Thailand, Malaysia, Japan, Israel, and the USA, among others.