Politeness in Interaction

— An analysis of politeness strategies in online learning and teaching

Marcia Markus

marmar11@student.hh.se

Spring term 2011
Table of Contents

1. Introduction
   1.1 Aim

2. Theoretical Background
   2.1 Politeness
   2.2 Formulaic and Semi-Formulaic Expressions
   2.3 Turn-adjacency or turn-taking
   2.4 Simultaneous feedback or backchannels

3. Methodology and Data
   3.1 Method of data collection
   3.2 Data
   3.3 Method of data analysis

4. Data Analysis and Results
   4.1 Formulaic Expressions
      4.1.1 Addressivity
      4.1.2 Ritualized expressions
      4.1.3 Specific speech acts
   4.2 Semi-formulaic Expressions
      4.2.1 Hedges
      4.2.2 Solidarity markers
   4.3 Turn-adjacency or turn-taking
   4.4 Simultaneous feedback or Backchannels

5. Conclusion

References

Appendix
1. Introduction

Teaching and learning online has become widespread but for some teachers there are a number of challenges involved. For instance, teachers may feel that compared with face-to-face contact they lose the comfort and familiarity with their students. Another much discussed issue with regard to online teaching and learning is the possible changes in social order caused by the absence or reduction in social cues. Assuming they have access to a computer and an Internet connection people both inside and outside of controlled and monitored academic learning environments are now able to speak up anonymously. They are also able to access as much information as they think they need, communicate with many different people and open up for contact with others without the need to meet face-to-face. In academic online communication there are certain goals which have to be met by both students and teachers. Teachers have to ensure that information exchange, instructions and discussion are all possible, while students need to be able to engage in discussions, complete assignments and interact with each other and with teachers. In their interaction, teachers and students are quite aware that the ability to participate in the communication process lies in the ways in which they use the language. In other words their construction of sentences, their ‘ways of getting their message across’ and also how they relate to each other plays a very important role in the nature and quality of the interaction. As participants in the communication process, we may see interaction as being built up of different expressions which may be used as we attempt to establish and maintain social and
professional relationships. The different expressions do not only include linguistic features such as words but also gestures, pauses and tone. In using these expressions, we choose strategically relevant language to initiate and maintain interaction. Depending on the reason to communicate or interact, teachers and students may fulfill socially recognized and accepted ways of requesting, offering, suggesting, complaining for example. The language chosen in these instances would then include indirect expressions and implicatures. What special considerations are there to be taken in terms of which expressions to use in online interaction? How will decisions, attitudes, chosen communication language impact upon these online interactions? The material and methods are discussed in detail in section 3.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to determine what types of politeness strategies are used in teacher-student and student-student interaction, to what extent they are used and what effects these politeness strategies have on the communication as a whole.

2. Theoretical Background

Written or spoken words or utterances can be studied by applying different strategies concerned with the study of pragmatics. Pragmatics includes four main areas of study: these are, the study of speaker meaning, contextual meaning, how more gets communicated than just what is said and finally the expression of relative distance (Yule, 2002:3). An analysis of speaker meaning would include taking a closer look at what people mean by what they say instead of analyzing what the sentences and phrases mean by themselves. A study of contextual meaning would include interpretations of how speakers choose and compile their utterances depending on who they are talking to and when and where the communication is taking place. Investigating the relevance of what is communicated by non-verbal means and
how close the relationship is between the speakers respectively, informs us of how more gets communicated than by verbal means.

In face-to-face communication we use politeness strategies in order to avoid face threatening acts when we interact with one another. As more and more communication takes place in an online environment, it is interesting to look at whether and how politeness strategies are used in situations like this. Presumably, the absence of gestures and facial expressions in online conversations may force the speaker to use other means or strategies to compensate.

Online communication means that the participants must rely on what is said or written alone to extract meaning. This may mean that whatever is communicated has to be shared through the careful choice of what is said or written alone. When we participate in an online text-based communication, we type our responses and this can be quite time-consuming. In addition, the extralinguistic cues that are present in face-to-face conversation are absent in a written conversation. Another important point to consider is that when we write, we need to anticipate potential misunderstandings, which means we need to choose our words carefully so that the meaning is clear to the person/s with whom we communicate. Therefore, explicitness plays a major role in our communication as information that is ambiguous can be easily misunderstood.” (Hård af Segerstad, 2002: 152)

Where paralinguistic cues are absent the text must carry so much more information. “Not only must the text carry the social situation, it must also carry the participants’ relationships to the situation, their perception of the relationships between the knowledge and objects under discussion” (Yates, 1996:46). In addition, (Herring, 1996) in her discussions regarding Internet Relay Chat (IRC) points out that, “face-to-face encounters are typically negotiated
by paralinguistic cues such as intonation, pauses, gestures and gaze” however, when these are absent, the speaker attempts to avoid ambiguity through the use of a property of discourse referred to as addressivity. Addressivity is used when the speaker indicates the intended addressee by putting that person’s name at the start of each utterance. Using the addressee’s name along with other vocatives is important in maintaining social relationships and first-name vocatives function as a way of recognizing “individuality among participants in conversation” (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999:1110). Exceptions as to when addressivity is used are in situations where expressions of greetings and farewell are directed at everyone on a particular channel, and even in situations where the information in the utterance contains enough cohesive force, so that it is clear who the statement is intended for without them being explicitly named (Herring, 1996:52).

The mechanism that governs turn-taking, and accounts for the properties involved, is a set of rules with ordered options which operates on a turn-by-turn basis, and can thus be termed a vocal management system (Levinson, 1983:301). One way of looking at the roles of the participants is to think of them as sharing a common need to control the ‘floor’. Therefore a sort of system must be included in the sharing which would require specified allocated units or ‘shares’ over which each speaker has control. These shares could then be seen as turns through which turn-by-turn talk are constructed (Levinson, 1983:302). These shares or units would therefore, be determined by “various features of linguistic surface structure, they are syntactic units (sentences, clauses, noun phrases and so on) identified as turn-units in part by prosodical, and especially intonational means” (Levinsson, 1983:303) “A speaker will be assigned initially just one of these turn-constructional units (although the extent of the unit is largely within the speaker’s control due to the feasibility of natural language syntax)” (Levinson, 1983:303). The idea is that at the end of the speaker’s turn, there is a point at
which the speaker may change to allow for the other speaker’s turn. This is referred to as a transition relevance place or TRP. (Levinson, 1983:304). “At a TRP, the rules that govern the transition of speakers then come into play, which does not mean that speakers will necessarily change turn at that point but simply that they may do so”. (Levinson, 1983:304).

A researcher looking at the characterization of such turns will still be required to do a considerable amount of linguistic work, but whatever its final shape the characterization must allow for the projectibility or predictability of each units’ end – for it is this alone that can account for the recurrent phenomenon of unpredictably exact speaker transition. There is one other feature of turn-units of which researchers should be aware, namely the possibility of specifically indicating within such a unit that the utterance is at its end and the next participant is invited to speak next. Techniques for selecting next speakers in this way can be quite elaborate, but include such straightforward devices as the following: “A question, an offer or request etc. plus an address term, assertion plus an address feature; and the various hearing and understanding checks, for example: Who? You did what? Pardon? You mean tomorrow etc. which select prior speaker as next”. (Levinson 1983:302)

An important consequence of the system is therefore that it provides: “independently of content or politeness considerations an intrinsic motivation for participants to both listen and process what is said for the transition rules prior to next speaker selection should it occur, and the projection of upcoming TRPs”. (Levinson, 1983:302) It is important to note that, “although the phenomena of turn-taking is obvious, the suggested mechanism organizing it is not” (Levinson 1983:303). For a start things could be quite the contrary; for example, cultural norms may mean an allocation of time and turn if turn-taking is based on the rank of the participants, so that if the teacher is perceived to have a higher social status than Student 1, and Student 2 followed by Student 3, then the order in which the parties will
talk is Teacher - Student 1 & 2- Student 3. Of course in most English speaking cultures there are special non-conversational turn-taking systems operative in for example classrooms and other institutional settings (Levinson 1983:304).

2.1 Politeness

The display of respect or deference in student teacher relationships is one example of awareness of face, based on the fact that a person who is a teacher will automatically have some authority and therefore social distance to a student. The student on the other hand, places the teacher in a certain position which demands some amount of authority. Even (Grundy 1995) writes about politeness in terms of language use among non-educational speakers and addressees. According to him politeness strategies can be a way of encoding distance between speakers and their addressees.

According to Yule (2002), “politeness in an interaction can be defined as the means employed to show awareness for another person’s face.” (Yule 2002:40). What is face and why is it important in interaction? Yule (2002) writes “face refers to our emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize”. (Yule 2002:42).

Mey (2001) poses the question as to whether ‘inherent’ and ‘universal’ politenesses exist. According to him, universal politeness can be put in the same framework of what Brown & Levinson (1987) define as ‘face’. One of the normal mechanisms that are included in a definition of ‘face’ consist of for example ‘turn-taking’. When analyzing conversation, turn-taking mechanisms cannot be ignored as they form the most important base. Turn-taking, therefore, looked at in a context of ‘face’ and even universal politeness represents a form of
underlying politeness. Simply explained, conversation is virtually impossible without turn-taking. Mey (2001) further points out that how we prioritize ‘face’ whether negatively or positively depends on our differences. These differences have their background in individual cultures. Yule (2002) writes that as humans we do not want to be imposed on by others, and this is referred to as negative face. The human need to be liked and accepted also forms an important part of our conversation needs. This is referred to as our positive face. According to Yule (2002), when we perform a face saving act or negative politeness such as apologizing for imposing or interrupting someone, we are appealing to the person’s negative face. On the other hand when we show solidarity with the next speaker we appeal to the person’s positive face. Mey (2001) continues his argument by emphasizing that there needs to be an awareness of how ‘face’ is usually defined. According to Mey (2001) ‘face’ is usually defined and discussed in a somewhat limited way which could be understood to mean that ‘face’ exclusively reflects the individual position. Here again our cultures define what could be a generally accepted model for a ‘perfect conversationist’, defined in a limited way as someone who waits their turn in a society defined orderly and acceptable fashion. Further, Mey (2001:79) points out that “obeying the rules of any game both marks you as a decent kind of person (one who doesn’t cheat) and may even give you a chance of coming out ahead of the others”.

Being polite in social settings or displaying appropriate etiquette in different ways depending on our cultural backgrounds or the culture we happen to be in at the time may function as a concept of politeness. People who are modest, respectful, tactful etc. are often referred to as those who display politeness. We can display these characteristics in everyday situations, however, when we conduct a conversation or participate in different interactions; there are other more specific types of politeness involved.
Brown & Levinson (1987) describe four types of politeness strategies that sum up human politeness behavior. These are *bald on-record strategy*, *positive politeness*, *negative politeness* and *off-record*. Bald on-record strategy is said to be used when the speaker makes no attempt to minimize the threat to the other person’s face. In positive politeness the speaker recognizes the friendliness in the relationship with the listener or listeners and their desire to be respected. Negative politeness is somewhat similar to positive politeness; however in this situation the speaker recognizes friendliness but assumes that whatever is said in the conversation would most likely be an imposition on the listener. Off record can be recognized in situations where the speaker for example, poses an indirect question and through this is able to transfer the decision making to the listener. Rather than politeness universals, Watts (2003) suggests an understanding of politeness not as structures made up of linguistically polite words and phrases, but as structures which are open for interpretation as politeness by each individual in situations of interaction.

### 2.2 Formulaic and Semi-Formulaic Expressions

Some of those structures are formulaic or semi-formulaic expressions. Watts (2003) suggests that in interaction we use utterances that are sometimes ritualized or “formulaic” while at other times “semi-formulaic”. Formulaic expressions are concerned with utterances used in a ritual kind of way, that is, utterances that are almost never omitted in interaction. Here, the assumption is that participants have already established their ‘face’ in the interaction and as such deliver utterances accordingly. The occurrence of ‘semi formulaic’ expressions in interaction is not as restricted as those of a formulaic nature. There are many suggested reasons for this; one of which is that in many English speaking cultures, formulaic
utterances are sometimes perceived to be ‘negative politeness’. Formulaic expressions can be greetings and first names, such as: *good morning, excuse me, hi and bye*. Watts (2003) writes that names are used as vocatives and they usually follow a greeting and have a number of functions. “…in general vocatives maintain and reinforce an existing social relationship.” (Biber et al., 1999: 1110). Semi-formulaic expressions are usually expressions of proposal. These may be, for example, hedges (attitudinal predicates) like, *I think, I mean,* *I believe*, boosters such as: *clearly, of course,* solidarity markers such as: *you know* and are in addition to those expressions which fulfill the function of carrying out indirect speech acts in keeping with the desired polit of the interaction.

Even though expressions of politeness are an important part of our daily interaction and can be examined and highlighted by researchers, as English speakers we do not consciously make an effort to add these to every conversation. However, if we do not use them or do not notice their use in situations of interaction, then the exchange of utterances can be interpreted by those involved in the interactions as being rude or abrupt (Yule, 2002:71). He argues also that a better understanding of conversation structure must play a major role in our analysis and interpretation of any interaction. Yule (2002) believes that in studying conversation there are factors which must be taken into consideration. These are for example the concept of “the floor” which basically refers to a participant’s right to speak, “turn-taking” where each participant in the conversation knows when it is their turn and when they need to give turns to others. In addition there are “backchannels” which are sounds made at the end of utterances indicating that the listener is following the exchange. With regard to interaction in management in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Herring (2003) identifies two obstacles to interaction management as a direct result of the medium and from which face-to-face communication does not “suffer”. One is “disrupted
adjacency” and the other is the “lack of simultaneous feedback” (Herring, 2003:618).

Disrupted adjacency in an online discussion forum means that responses may not come immediately after the message to which they refer because contributions are normally displayed in the chronological order in which they are posted, and participants are mostly online at different times.

2.3 Turn-adjacency or turn-taking

Levinson (1983) writes that the main feature that constitutes conversation is turn-taking. This is simply defined as one participant talking then stopping and the other starts then stops and the process continues over and over. However, Cameron (2001) argues that the process of turn-taking may not be as obvious as we think. According to her, simultaneous speech and silence allows for the negotiating and renegotiating of the speaker ‘floor’ among the participants in the conversation. Cameron (2001) further points out that there are many ways for a speaker to select the next person to speak. Some of these ways include naming them (especially common in a classroom setting), asking them a question, sharply raising or lowering your voice or even aligning your body or gaze so that you are specifically addressing the next speaker. Expressions that are used to signal the end of a turn are for example: *y’know, uhm, kinda, I don’t know*

2.4 Simultaneous feedback or backchannels

According to Yule (2002) sometimes in conversation, one speaker allows the other “extended” time through preludes by first asking a question, then partly answering it. For example, “Have you heard about Rita? – oh she got a hair-cut in...” Even though these preludes allow for the suspension of the turn-taking process, the first speaker will still expect the other speaker to indicate that they are listening. The ‘listener’ can nod, smile, and use
expressions such as *uh-huh, hmm, mmm*, yeah and so on, to let the first speaker know that they are listening. These examples of body language and utterances are referred to as back-channels.

3. **Methodology and Data**

This section deals with the materials and methods used in the present study.

3.1 **Method of data collection**

The material for the present study consists of a series of seminars for a course in language proficiency for academic studies. Four seminars were recorded and one of them chosen for analysis. The specific seminar was selected on the basis of the audio in the recording as this was almost free from technical disturbances. In addition, the chosen seminar had the largest number of participants. There are nine students in the group lead by one teacher and their discussions and conversations during the seminar for a duration of an hour and a half, form the primary data to be analyzed in this paper.

3.2 **Data**

The data consists of the conversation exchange between a teacher and students in an online seminar.

3.3 **Method of data analysis**

The researcher listened to the recording in its entirety before a transcription of the interaction between teacher and students and among the students themselves was done. “Transcribing is a way to bring into focus the characteristics of spoken discourse, which are surprisingly obscure to most people, familiar as they are with the written form.” (Cameron,
In addition, punctuation marks have been used in the transcribed discourse. This may be perceived by the reader as not very acceptable since this may lead to discussions as to the *faithfulness* of the data (Cameron, 2007:35).

The transcription was then examined and instances of formulaic expressions, semi-formulaic expressions, turn-taking and backchannels selected. The Swedish utterances during the seminar were not translated. The actual words of the speakers were transcribed, analyzed and punctuation marks included. In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants, the teacher is referred to as ‘teacher’ and the students are referred to as Student 1, Student 2 and so on up to Student 9. To further protect the identities of the teacher and students, even place names and institution names are fictitious.

An analysis of the transcribed material is done in order to identify and categorize a number of linguistic devices which can be interpreted as politeness expressions and structures in interaction in an online learning environment communication. The scope of this paper does not allow for the analysis of all factors involved in conversation. These factors are for example non-formulaic expressions. Therefore, the data identified, analyzed and discussed in this essay comprises a limited number of expressions which may be classified as formulaic expressions, semi-formulaic expressions, turn-taking and simultaneous feedback or backchannels

4. **Data Analysis and Results**

In this section the four different types of expressions and their under categories will be dealt with in each of the sections.
4.1 Formulaic Expressions

The formulaic expressions found in the transcription are divided into three different groups and discussed in the subsections below.

4.1.1 Addressivity

For the teacher and students in the following interaction, the use of their first names to address each other is of absolute necessity, as in multiparty conversation not addressing the person would lead to confusion and uncertainty as to whom is being addressed and who should provide a response. In other words these form part of the expected politic behaviour in this situation. The use of these expressions here can be interpreted as being conventional and thus “politely necessary”.

(100) Teacher: So, let’s try again...I can hear Student 4
(101) Teacher: I can hear Student 1, Student 2, Student 3
(102) Teacher: Can Student 4...can you please don’t push your button
(106) Teacher: Student 5, yes, can you hear me? I think...
(109) Teacher: Then I think Student 6 is the only one...

Initial assumptions can be made that the teacher being the person given the most power uses this politeness strategy to avoid ambiguity and discontinuity in structures of turn-taking or exchanges in the conversation. However, the use of addressivity is imperative in an Internet multiparty communication environment (Werry, 1996:52). How would the teacher capture the attention of each individual student without using their names? This becomes even more necessary in online interaction when compared to face-to-face encounters. Werry writes that in face-to-face encounters turn-taking would be made possible by paralinguistic cues such as intonation, pauses, gesture and gaze (Werry, 1996:52). Another
factor that we must consider is that in online communication the speaker is usually active and the listener passive. This is due to the fact that usually the listener cannot provide the minimal non-verbal responses such as nodding and ‘uh huh’ which signal active attention. This means that the speaker must employ appropriate strategies, in this case, addressivity in order to recapture the attention of the listener with each new utterance. Further “addressing the listener by name can be partly explained in terms of a general tendency to communicate in a way that compensates for the weakened link between sender and receiver” (Werry 1996:52).

Even though the use of addressivity pervades in many channels of online interaction, there are several contexts in which it is omitted. This can be seen in an interaction where the teacher addresses all the students as a group, as in the following:

(148) Teacher: Oh ja, I forgot something I was gonna say right at the beginning here
(149) Teacher: There we go, ja I hope ja...can you see a page on the whiteboard... eh?

It is possible that the content of a message may provide sufficient information so that it is clear whom the statement or greeting is intended for, without using any names.

4.1.2 Ritualized expressions

Apart from the use of first names in the interaction the teacher uses other formulaic or so-called ritualized expressions such as Yes, how are you? Yes, hello!

(104) Teacher: Welcome, welcome!
(105) Student 4: Thank you!
(107) Student 5: Yes, how are you?
4.1.3 Specific speech acts

Speech acts can be classified as either direct or indirect depending on whether an action or function is required. When constructions such as *Did she...? Were they...? Can he...?* are used in questions then this is described as a direct speech act (Yule, 1985:100-102). Indirect speech acts, on the contrary, are used in expectation of the performance of an action. For example “*Hand me the book*”. Statements may also be classified as indirect speech acts. It is generally more acceptable in conversation and seen as more polite, to use indirect speech acts than direct speech acts (Yule, 1985:101). Yule points out further that “our ability to interpret the function of speech acts is just one more example of the process of interpretation relying on a notion of what speaker’s intent to ‘mean’ (Yule, 1985:102)”

Examples of direct and indirect speech acts occurring in the seminar interaction are:

**Direct Speech acts**

(106) Can you hear me?

(115) Teacher: Ah... **Student 6 you** live here?

(116) Student 6: Next week I will go back to...Ah hehe. Go back to...!

(117) Teacher: Are **you** looking forward to going back to...?

(119) Teacher: See **your** family and everything?

**Indirect speech acts**

(102) Can **you** please don’t push your button.

(149) Can **you** see a page...?
18

(133)...maybe you can tell the group a little bit about yourself?

(142) Where?

(146) Were you working...?

In discussions or research on indirect speech acts, the aspects of ‘form’, ‘mean’ and ‘usage’ must also be considered. An example which could be looked at in this case is (102)“Can you please don’t push your button...?” Here the structure of this speech act shows a relation between form and meaning. The pragmatic effect is achieved by virtue of the meaning of the phrase (Brown & Levinsson, 1987:259). Further, (102) Can you please... could mean ‘Would you mind ...’ and could be a straightforward way of fulfilling the aim of the teacher, which is to tell the student “I hope you are willing to not push the button...”

In addition, in order for speech acts to have any effect they need to be situated (situated speech acts). In this way speech acts are quite similar to what is referred to as speech events in ethnographic and anthropological studies (Mey, 2001: 219). What this means is that speech of this classification is central to specific social activities such as teaching, or visiting a doctor’s office (Mey, 2001: 219). Further, in situated speech acts, speech can be said to be prescribed; that is only certain words and utterances are acceptable. Moreover, the participants in the situation are the ones who establish and reaffirm the social situation in which the utterances are used and in which they participate (Mey, 2001: 219). This would then mean that in the seminar being analyzed, the students have accepted the situation as a
social one but with specific needs in terms of what language is acceptable and even the teacher’s place or authority in the order of things. But what does this mean for the researcher in, for example this paper, attempting to analyze the purport of speech by looking at the words and phrases used in conversation? According to Mey (2002:220) “meaning arises out of the interaction between language and circumstances, rather than being encapsulated in the language itself”. One conclusion could be then that no speech act in and by itself makes sense (Mey, 2001:221). So then, if an analysis is to be done of speech in interaction, then the ideal result should be based on the language user’s possibilities in given or prescribed situations. In the seminar being analyzed, some amount of consideration must be given to the fact that the teacher has an elevated role in terms of ‘face’ and accepted language while the students are automatically expected to be much more restrictive in their use of words and phrases.

4.2 Semi-formulaic Expressions

Four kinds of semi-formulaic expressions were identified in the material. They are discussed in each of the following sections.

4.2.1 Hedges

Perhaps most of the verbal hedges used by the teacher in the examples below could be replaced by (or emphasized by) prosodic or kinesic means of indicating tentativeness or emphasis. In face-to-face interaction the presence of raised eyebrows or an earnest frown would suffice for increasing understanding on the part of the students, of the teacher’s intention to impose on them through the use of a face threatening act (FTA).

(106) Teacher: Student 5, yes, can you hear me? I think...
(109) Teacher: Then I think Student 6 is the only one...
(131) Teacher: Okay, ja, I guess I haven’t pressed every button yet

(111, 112, 120, 122, 123, 132, 134, 145, 147, 159, 185, 187, 188) Teacher: eh, ehm, ah, ahm, ahh

(191) Teacher: So please when you want to speak push the button and when you are finished, let go so that others can speak

(192) Teacher: ...bibliography...no sorry...biography and words and then you can find the works of Guillou...then you get a lot of different pages you get on Guillou eh...sorry...

(196) Teacher: Ah! Maybe I’m not supposed to give you any advice about printing so do whatever you want.

(190) Student 8: Yes, when I...I think I the first day; I didn’t know that you have to push the button to speak, maybe some people don’t know...

As this interaction is taking place online, the utterances of umms and ahs, eh and ahm function as hesitations that indicate the speaker’s attitude towards what he is saying, and are often the most relevant and perceived clue to the presence of an FTA. Each time we engage in an interaction, we put our face at risk. Here face can be compared to or be synonymous with our self-esteem. Therefore, we try to ensure that our utterances protect our own face wants while at the same time minimize or eliminate any imposition on other participants in the interaction. In other words we may, through our utterances be oriented to the positive or to the negative face of those we interact with (Grundy, 1995:133). By using hedges such as I think and I guess, the teacher may indicate an awareness of the importance of the maxim of quality for cooperative interaction in that these hedges may be interpreted as an indication that what the teacher is saying may not be totally correct and that the students should either wait for further information or instruction (Yule, 2002:38).

4.2.2 Solidarity markers
The tendency to use positive politeness forms, emphasizing closeness between speaker and hearer, can be seen as a solidarity strategy. This may be the principal operating strategy among a whole group or it may be an option used by an individual speaker on a particular occasion. Linguistically, such a strategy will include personal information, use of nicknames, and shared dialect or slang expressions. Frequently, solidarity strategies will be marked via inclusive terms such as ‘we’ and ‘let’s’, as in interaction utterances shown below:

(125) Teacher: Let’s hope for better weather in Sweden, eh, the rest of the summer
(133) Teacher: Student 4, where do you come from, maybe you can tell the group a little bit about yourself
(134) Student 4: Yes, ahm, I’m originally from Spain
(135) Teacher: Oh ya, Spain I remember yes
(136) Student 4: Ya but I live in Sweden
(137) Teacher: And before that you lived in Germany?
(138) Student 4: Yes! Berlin The capital! You been there?
(139) Teacher: Nooo! I’ve been, unfortunately, I’ve been in Iceland but not in Germany
(141) Teacher: Yes, I lived in the states for 8 years
(143) Teacher: In a city called...the...state of ...is the capital
(147) Teacher: Well yes, I did different things and when I got tired of working I went back to school to the University of California and actually got a degree in Psychology there and my PHD. Eh, that’s a nice place and I hope to go back later towards the end of this summer here to visit...
(187) Teacher: We have more participants here now eh...Welcome to you!
(197) Teacher: Very good, ah let’s see ah okay...oh okay let’s continue

In instances (125) and (187), the teacher uses we and let’s to include the entire group. The teacher could also have said in (125) I hope for better weather... but instead chose to say
indirectly “join me in hoping for better weather” creating a feeling of togetherness and belonging among the entire seminar group while still including the teacher.

4.3 Turn-adjacency or Turn-taking

One strategy which may be used by speakers such as lecturers is designed to avoid having normal completion points occur. As language users we all employ this strategy to some extent, usually in situations where we have to work out what we are trying to say while actually saying it. (Yule, 1985:109) Examples can be seen here in these interaction situations:

(112) Teacher: And eh... Student 7 is in ........? Ahh, let’s see what I can remember of ehm where you are and so, in ........

(113) Teacher: Student 8 you are from Italy?

(114) Student 8: Yes, but I live in Sweden

(115) Teacher: Ah..., Student 6 you live here?

(116) Student 6: Next week I will go back to Spain Ah he! he! Go back to Italy!

(117) Teacher: Are you looking forward to going back to Italy?

(118) Student 6: Yeh! Oh! I will go back to Spain next week. Stay here!

(119) Teacher: See your family and everything?

(120) Student 6: Yeh, I will go and ah...hmm... spend my holiday in my hometown

(121) Teacher: Okay and you’re going back to Spain and Student 9 too?

(122) Student 9: Eh, I will come back to my home country tomorrow

(123) Teacher: Ah! Ah! Later this summer?

(124) Student 9: No, tomorrow Spain. Stay here...

(125) Teacher: Let’s hope for better weather in Sweden, eh, the rest of the summer

(126) Teacher: I was out biking yesterday...Ah long bike turn and got wet but I am...

If the normal expectation is that completion parts are marked by the end of a sentence and a pause, then one suggested way to ‘keep the turn’ is to avoid having those two indicators
occur together. That is, speakers should make every effort not to pause at the end of sentences, but rather allow sentences to run on by using connectors such as ‘and’ ‘then’ ‘so’ and ‘but’. The speaker should pause at points where the message is clearly incomplete and ‘fill’ the pause with hesitation markers such as *er, em, uh, ah* (Yule, 1985:109). Some of these ‘pause fillers’ can be seen in sentences 112, 115, 116, 120, 125 and 126.

These types of strategies by themselves should not be considered undesirable or unnecessary. They are often present in the conversational speech of most people and they are in a sense part of what makes conversations work. These subtle indicators may be recognized in interaction, as strategies of organizing our turns and negotiating our way through social interaction via language. In fact, one of the most noticeable features of conversational discourse is that it is generally very co-operative. This observation has, in fact, been formulated as a principle of conversation (Yule, 1985:109). In this case, the teacher asks questions, receives feedback from the students and vice versa. Even though the information provided may not have relevance for the fulfillment of the aspects included in an academic situation, the exchange does strengthen the accepted *basic principles of politeness* in interaction. In addition this is another case in which both the teacher and the students show awareness for each other’s *face wants*. Accomplishing politeness in interaction situations such as the online seminar being analysed, demands recognition of social distance or closeness. The students’ recognition of the teacher’s social distance can be seen here in that they answer the questions put to them. In other words the students have chosen to respect the teacher’s social position in the interaction. Not answering the questions would indicate an attitude of deference, quite the opposite of respect, and thus ‘socially violating’ expected politeness strategies and ultimately overall principles of interaction (Yule, 2002:61). An important point in this discussion is that the teacher and
students must determine as they speak, the relative social distance between them, in order
to fulfill their ‘face wants’.

4.4 Simultaneous feedback or Backchannels

Apart from the ‘floor-holding’ strategy of turn-taking discussed previously, there are
backchannels which are also classified as politeness strategies. Participants in an interaction
expect a response from those with whom they converse. There are different ways in which
each participant may indicate that they are listening and following the exchange. Some
listeners may nod, smile, gesture and employ other facial expressions. The most common
indicators are called backchannels. (Yule, 2002:75) In the online seminar being analyzed,
and as previously mentioned, facial expressions, nods and gestures may be present in the
interaction however, will be difficult to acknowledge or notice since participants are not
involved in a face-to-face conversation. Therefore, here the teacher and students must rely
on utterances. In the example (123) below the teacher provides feedback to the student by
saying *Ah! Ah!*, before expanding the utterance by adding further information. Then the
student knows that the message is received. Even the students indicate that they are
listening to and following the conversation by replying with backchannel devices *Yeh, No, Oh*
*Ya and Eh* as in sentences 118, 122, 123, 124 and 135.

But why are backchannels important in conversation? The teacher needs to know that the
student is listening or has heard the utterance. The absence of backchannels may mean that
the teacher would need to ask if the student heard anything. Making sure to include
backchannels in their interactions, both teachers and students are aware of the importance
of silence in conversation. Not answering a question or providing some sort of indication
that each participant has heard the other, could be interpreted as withholding agreement. This could then lead, unnecessarily, to either inference or disagreement (Yule, 2002:77).

Conclusion

As mentioned in this paper, politeness strategies are used frequently in interaction. There are many different politeness strategies which speakers use to ensure turn-taking, the natural flow of conversation, save face, respect the face needs of the listener, and in general to fulfill the requirements of negative and positive politeness.

The aim of this essay was to identify and analyze a number of linguistic expressions which could function as politeness strategies in interaction between teacher and students during a seminar conducted online. As more and more students choose to study online, teachers need to adapt to the differences in interacting online and interacting face-to-face. One of the most salient observations in the present study is that in comparison to face-to-face classroom interaction where turns are assigned by gestures such as a smile, a nod or a look or pointing, in the online multiparty interaction, the teacher uses addressivity as a way of assigning a turn. The reason for this is that a nod or a look would not be sufficient as all of the students are in the same position in relation to the teacher and therefore they would all experience that the teacher nodded toward them simultaneously. In a face-to-face classroom, there would be some spatial differentiation between where the different students were located in relation to the teacher. In the online environment, their images are displayed within a limited number of square centimeters on the screen and a nod or look from the teacher would not be precise enough to distinguish between them.

The analysis involved identifying specific politeness strategies and discussing their function in interaction, by looking at linguistic devices or specific words used in conversation.
examining their function in interaction. Measuring the effectiveness of the use of politeness strategies in conversation is a difficult process as being polite in a social sense, allows for disagreements in terms of appropriacy, relevance and societal norms in terms of what is allowed, accepted and required in interaction. In addition some functions of politeness strategies depend heavily on the speakers’ and even the listeners’ personal interpretation of the message being transmitted. As has been repeatedly shown throughout this essay, the linguistic realizations and awareness of positive and negative politeness strategies may either mean that an interaction situation is carried out in an orderly manner or, totally inhibited from any progress among the participants in the conversation.

There are many different politeness strategies. The focus of this study has been to analyze a limited number of these. The politeness strategies analyzed in this paper focused more on the speakers in interactional opportunities which became available through dialogues. This choice of focus increased the possibility of the analyses being more on a participant level, that is, it shows the speaker and the listeners anticipated interpretations combined with the accepted status of the speaker. Further research is needed on other aspects of communication such as the paralinguistic features involved in participating in and conducting an online discussion. These features include tone of the speaker’s voice, body language and so on. As mentioned in this paper, these can be interpreted as being inextricably combined with the dialogue or conversation, when a study of the overall interaction is being done. In addition the reduced amount of paralinguistic features means that the participants in the seminar have to rely more on words and other utterances to fulfill the requirements of interaction. The observations made in this study may serve as an inspiration to those interested in conducting further research in the specific area of transcribed interaction and in general in the area of online interaction. Another aspect of
communication which could be included in and expanded on in future research is that of ‘sounds’ in conversation – some sounds made during spoken discourse are not only indecipherable but also impossible to transcribe. Another interesting research area which could be explored would involve the comparison of an online seminar with one that takes place face-to-face, in order to see if and in what ways the politeness strategies differ.

Finally, conclusions drawn from an analysis of the online seminar are that there is evidence of politeness strategies being used by participants in online interaction which we expect to find in face-to-face conversation. The use of politeness strategies by the teacher may be deliberate as the teacher, in this position of authority, is probably aware of the impact that carefully selected and structured linguistic features/utterances have on the students and on meaning in conversation. Ordinarily a student may not pay close attention to the uses of hedges, formulaic expressions, specific speech acts and the teacher’s allowance for turn-taking processes to take place, but this may be the most important premise on which linguistic expressions classified as politeness strategies and used in interaction, rest.
References


Goody (ed.), *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction* (pp. 56-289). New York: Cambridge University Press.


Appendix

(Seminar interaction)

(100) Teacher: So, let’s try again…I can hear Student 4
(101) Teacher: I can hear Student 1, Student 2, Student 3
(102) Teacher: Can Student 4...can you please don’t push your button
(103) Student 4: Yes, I’m here...
(104) Teacher: Welcome, welcome,
(105) Student 4: Thank you
(106) Teacher: Student 5, yes, can you hear me? I think...
(107) Student 5: Yes, how are you?
(108) Teacher: Yes, hello, very nice voice, loud and clear
(109) Teacher: Then I think,, Student 6 is the only one...
(110) Student 6: Yes, hi, how are you?
(111) Teacher: I’m fine, ja...ah great!
(112) Teacher: And eh... Student 7 is in .......? Ahh, let’s see what I can remember of ehm where you are and so, in .......
(113) Teacher: Student 8 you are from....?
(114) Student 8: Yes, but I live in......
(115) Teacher: Ah... Student 6 you live here?
(116) Student 6: Next week I will go back to ...... Ah hehe. Go back to ...... !
(117) Teacher: Are you looking forward to going back to....?
(118) Student 6: Yeh! Oh! I will go back to ....next week.
(119) Teacher: See your family and everything?
(120) Student 6: Yeh, I will go and ah...hmm... spend my holiday in my hometown
(121) Teacher: Okay and you’re going back to Spain and Student 9 too?
(122) Student 9: Eh, I will come back to my home country tomorrow
Teacher: Ah! Ah! later this summer?

Student 9: No, tomorrow Spain Stay here!

Teacher: Let’s hope for better weather in Sweden, eh, the rest of the summer

Teacher: I was out biking yesterday...Ah long bike tur and got wet but I am...

Student 4: Teacher, where do you live Teacher?

Teacher: I live in .... And we had ahh the whole department had a meeting in Gothenburg which is about ...where we met is about 20 km from here

Student 4: Teacher one question

Teacher: Student 4, where do you come from, maybe you can tell the group a little bit about yourself

Student 4: Yes, ahm, I’m originally from Spain

Teacher: Oh ya, Spain I remember yes

Student 4: Ya but I live in Sweden

Teacher: And before that you lived in Germany?

Student 4: YeBerlin The capital! You been there?

Teacher: Nooo! I’ve been, unfortunately, I’ve been in Iceland but not in Germany

Student 4: Okay, you’ve been in the states?

Teacher: Yes, I lived in the states for 8 years

Student 4: Oh! Where?

Teacher: In a city called Main the Ohio state of... Main’s the capital

Student 4: I was visiting Texas and Michigan a little bit...okay it’s nice

Teacher: Eh!.....is further north and more in the middle compared to the places where you were. Eh if you fly from here, you would fly to Munich and then go two and a half hours north, northwest by car

Student 4: Were you working there?
Teacher: Well yes, I did different things and when I got tired of working I went back to school to the University of California and actually got a degree in psychology there and my PHD. Eh, that’s a nice place and I hope to go back later towards the end of this summer here to visit.

Teacher: Oh ja, I forgot something I was gonna say right at the beginning here.

Teacher: There we go, ja I hope ja...can you see a page on the whiteboard eh?

Student 9: Eh I cannot see it.

Student 4: You can see it? I can neither see it? I don’t know you...you have to trick...push a button or something.

Teacher: Yes, I know I am desparately pressing buttons here...

Teacher: You have to go to archive...maybe... first..[Teacher: I’ve been there...]

Teacher: It should be on the board now]

Student 8: Eh..hello! I think you need to do it so a couple of times because sometimes it doesn’t catch up with that all ..the...you...press ...so try to do it a couple of times and then it works okay.

Teacher: Now it works? Yes, I press the correct button...

Student 9: I see now... is that page you mean?

Teacher: Yes, I can see that now...Oh welcome!

Teacher: We have more participants here now eh...Welcome to you!

Teacher: Is the name of the assignment on the page is the next question here eh... use 12 points New Roman font. Is it double spaced? Has the spelling being checked? Have I cited my reference correctly? Sorry...do I have page numbers ...ehm...

Teacher: A couple of you ...ehm... forgot your...the name...and email so that’s why I’m reminding you basically ehem...let’s see, that’s that little thing and now...ah... Student 7 is here, Student 6 and Student 5 eh... and Student 4, Student 10, Student 3...

Student 8: Yes, when I...I think I the first day; I didn’t know that you have to push the button to speak, maybe some people don’t know
(191) Teacher: So please when you want to speak push the button and when you are finished let go so that others can speak.

(192) Teacher: Okay ah, so while we are trying out buttons and stuff I’ll go to another page on the computer...ah...okay so we went through the goals of the course last time so...while we are at practical things I tried it out ahm...tried out the ahm...the ahm...short stories for next time eh...and it’s really easy you go to eh...you google them eh...google and ehm...just ehm...print in...type in...oh! and ah...push and you will find, find this text I have pretty soon ah...yes there I have the following steps eh...google...and then you will get to a page where it says a lot about the different headlines...about...and then you can go to bibliography...no sorry...biography and words and then you can find the works of Guillou and among them the Bird of Prey the same thing works with A Fine Place eh...Google...then you get a lot of different pages you get on Guillou eh...sorry, I was waving the piece of paper here in front of my face...I found the literature page 3 among these materials about Bird of Prey here about A Fine Place.

(193) Jaha, Student 4 has a meeting with...ehm, have you tried another...window, may be you can try to email her or call her really quick. I haven’t seen her today...Ehm...have you tried to email her by the way...ah...?

(194) Student 5: So we can first print any text from Google?

(195) Teacher: Well eh. Eh what are the rules today about that in Sweden? Well you can at least read it...read it on your screen and ah maybe I’m not supposed to give you any advice about printing so do whatever you want.

(196) Student: 6 Eh! Always if you print it yourself there must be a copyright protection for the paper otherwise you can always print it. For yourself it is okay if you don’t distribute it still...okay...ah...ah okay.

(197) Teacher: Very good ah let’s see ah okay I was trying to look at something else here but oh okay let’s continue...