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## POLITENESS ISSUES IN COMMUNICATION OVER TEXT MESSAGES

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### *Abstract*

*Text messages have become common media of communication in this era. Face-to-face interactions between teachers and students have often been replaced by virtual communication through these media. In practice, such a communication may create breakdown due to the language which is used in them. Politeness features which serve an essential buffer for a successful interaction are sometimes neglected. The research was aimed at analyzing politeness issues appearing in English and Indonesian text messages. The communication took place between Indonesian students at the English Education Department of Sanata Dharma University Yogyakarta and their teachers. Thirty text messages were collected from various teachers and then they were analyzed. The analysis revealed that there were features in the text messages which did not abide by the principles of politeness. It could be seen among others from the diction and absence of greetings and address terms. The situation was potentially able to induce discomfort on the receiver's part and it may affect the flow and success of communication. From the findings it could be concluded that not all of the senders had sociolinguistic competence. Such senders often disregarded the concepts of social distance and power relation, which should actually be taken into consideration while texting their teachers.*

**Keywords:** *text messages, communication, politeness, sociolinguistic competence*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Communication nowadays has been made easier with the advancement of technology. People may communicate with each other through a variety of modern tools, such as through mobile phones. Distance among people is minimized as these modern means of communication are able to connect people wherever they are. In addition to using short message service, the existence of numerous messenger applications, such as Whatsapp messenger and Blackberry Messenger, have made communication faster and easier. The use of this gadget along with messenger applications in education domain is also unavoidable. Not only has it been used to communicate among students or among teachers, but now it is also used to replace a face to face interaction between students and teachers. Instead of meeting the teacher in person or giving him/her a call, which is definitely more costly, students will send text messages to their teachers with whom they want to communicate.

The growing use of text messages in academic setting has raised the issues of politeness. Some teachers have been heard making complaints about the students' use of language in the text messages sent to them. The complaints were largely about the text messages which were seen to be lacking politeness seen from the receivers' viewpoint. This happens both in the text messages written in English and in Indonesian.

The research was aimed at analyzing English and Indonesian text messages which were sent by the English Education Department students of Sanata Dharma University to their teachers in light of politeness features. Thirty text messages were collected from a number of teachers and then they were analyzed. The analysis focused on describing the students' use of languages in the messages and analyzing whether the languages adhere to politeness theories.

### 1. REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES

The following part elaborates the theories that underlie the research. They are theories on language variation and code choice, politeness, factors which affect politeness, and sociolinguistic competence.

### 1. Language Variation and Code Choice

Language use varies from person to person. The variation, according to Holmes (2001), is determined by gender, education, social status, interactional status, speech events, interlocutors, and the group(s) one wishes to be identified with (or, sometimes, disassociated from). Speakers select a particular code, or language, by considering some social factors (Holmes, 2001). Addressee is one of the factors. In any interaction, speakers always plan their utterances with the addressee in mind. Other factors are social context of the talk and the topic of discussion.

Furthermore, a code is selected by taking account of social distance. It means that how well the participants know each other will determine the language to be used in the interaction. Certain linguistic choices indicate social relationship that the speaker perceives to exist between his/her interlocutor. In addition, status relationship (including social role), degrees of formality of an interaction, and the function or goal of the interaction, be it affective or referential, should also be taken into consideration in selecting a certain code.

In describing code choice, an area called discourse domain is employed. Domain refers to a number of typical interactions which are relevant in describing patterns of code choice in many speech communities. Holmes (2001: 20) states that “A domain involves typical interactions between typical participants in typical settings.” It implies that domain constitutes three elements; they are topic, participants, and setting. For example, a conversation about throwing a birthday party for a family member will be one of the typical topics in family domain.

### 2. Politeness

Politeness is a central issue in language learning. Being linguistically polite means that a speaker has the ability to select linguistic forms which express the appropriate degree of social distance or which recognize relevant status or power differences (Holmes, 2001). By so doing, the speaker will make his/her conversation partners at ease because his/her feelings are taken into consideration. To successfully do so, a speaker needs cultural knowledge as the degree of politeness is different between one culture and another. Such knowledge requires the speaker’s awareness of ‘face’ and the sense of self and of the addressees (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

The concept of politeness is related to Goffman’s work on ‘face’ (as cited in Brown and Levinson, 1987). Face means “the public self-image of a person. It refers to “the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize” (Yule, 1998: 60). The purpose of face is to avoid embarrassing the interlocutors or making them feel uncomfortable (Brown and Levinson, 1987). From the definition, two kinds of face are derived, namely positive face and negative face. According to Brown & Levinson (in Wardhaugh, 2002: 272), the former refers to “the desire to gain the approval of others”, while the latter refers to “the desire to be unimpeded by others in one’s actions.” Positive face is solidarity-oriented. Negative face, on the other hand, concerns the need to act without giving offence.

Consequently, these two kinds of face result in two kinds of politeness. Positive politeness is characterized by attempts to attain solidarity through statements of friendship, using language informally, employing compliments, and using hedging and attempts to avoid conflict. “It emphasizes shared attitudes and values” (Holmes, 2001: 268), which means that it expresses solidarity and minimize status difference. Positive politeness deals with positive face, i.e. one’s self esteem.

Positive politeness strategy recognizes the addressee’s desire to be respected, accepted, or liked by others, treated as a member of the group. Besides, it recognizes the addressee’s needs to know that his/her wants are shared by others. It also verifies that the relationship is friendly and expresses group reciprocity. Such strategies seek to minimize the threat to the hearer’s positive face.

Negative politeness, on the other hand, is shown by paying people respect and avoiding intruding on them. It involves “expressing oneself appropriately in terms of social distance and respecting status differences” (Holmes, 2001: 268). Negative politeness focuses more on expressing oneself appropriately in terms of social distance and respecting status differences. Such politeness is characterized by deference, apology, indirectness, and using language formally.

It has been common knowledge that speakers need to respect each other's expectations regarding self-image, consider their feelings, and avoid face threatening-acts (FTAs). FTAs are "acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker" as Brown and Levinson (1987: 65) state. To decide which strategy to use in real life situations, there are three sociological factors to consider (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The first factor is social distance between parties, i.e. how they are related. The second factor is power relations between parties. The way one speaks will be different whenever speaking to social equals or those whose status is higher or lower. The third factor is the threat level of the imposition.

### 3. Factors Affecting Politeness

There are four dimensions which influence polite use of language as proposed by Holmes (2001: 9-11). They are social distance scale, status scale, formality scale, and referential and affective function scales. According to Holmes (2001), the Social Distance Scale is solidarity-oriented, whereby it is related to participant relationships. This shows that how well people know each other will determine the linguistic choices. An example of this is the use of first name over full name. The Status Scale also deals with the relationships of the participants. The linguistic choices are determined by the relative status existing between the speaker and the hearer. The third scale, The Formality Scale, concerns itself with the setting or type of interaction which will affect the language styles, i.e. the formality of the language. The more formal an interaction is, the higher the level of formality will be. The Referential and Affective Function Scales are related to the purposes of an interaction. It shows how much information content or speakers' emotions or attitudes there are. The more referentially-oriented an interaction is, the less emotional content it will carry.

### 4. Sociolinguistic Competence

Sociolinguistic competence is one of the pragmatic aspects of communicative competence, which deals with how language is used in communication situations to achieve a speaker's purposes. Acquiring sociolinguistic competence is a difficult undertaking, even in one's first language. Sociolinguistic competence is defined as the ability to interpret the social meaning of the choice of linguistic varieties and to use language with the appropriate social meaning for the communication situation (as cited in Broersma, 2016). It is understood as the ability to use language appropriately as confirmed by Holmes (2001: 366-367), who claims that sociolinguistic competence refers to "the knowledge which underlies people's ability to use language appropriately." Broersma (2016) argues that having good sociolinguistic competence means having an ability to "read situations and know what is the right thing to say or do."

Possessing sociolinguistic competence in a second language is critical. Lacking this competence will make people think that the speaker is ignorant. This may happen if his/her grammar is poor. Even worse than that, the speaker will be thought of as being ill-mannered, dishonest, insincere, rude, pushy, and some more negative impressions. By contrast, if his/her grammar is excellent, the absence of such ability is considered sociolinguistic gaffes, which may result in disappointment, shock, bewilderment, insult, or contempt.

Many people assume that language learners will acquire sociolinguistic competence naturally as they are exposed to the culture of the language they are learning. However, this is untrue. Learners need to be assisted to understand how to behave appropriately in a new cultural context. Thus, efforts to improve sociolinguistic competence of learners should be an integral part of language learning early on.

The goal of a language learning process is developing the ability to communicate competently (NCLRC Home, 2007). One of the competences referred to is sociolinguistic competence. This refers to the ability to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people who are involved in the communication. This implies that a speaker should try to avoid offending their conversation partners.

As language is used for communication, language learning should be directed at possessing sociolinguistic competence, which is closely related to politeness. People are expected, among others, to have knowledge about the social distance norms of the community and knowledge of how to use the community language which signals one's membership of social group and enacts social identities, and to choose appropriate linguistic code or variety in different domains and for different functions. In a nutshell, a sociolinguistically-competent speaker should have the ability to choose

language forms which express the appropriate degree of social distance or which recognize relevant status or power differences between the participants.

Acquiring sociolinguistic competence in a language is a difficult process. It is not enough to understand the language solely. It is beyond having rich vocabulary, sophisticated grammar, and excellent pronunciation. More importantly, it requires a speaker to understand the social and cultural values of the community, as well as its social distance norms.

## 2. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Thirty text messages were collected to be analyzed. Of those thirty texts, twelve were in Indonesian and eighteen were in English. Because the media of the communication were chat boards, which was limited in space, the occurrence of reduced forms or abbreviations was neglected. Nonetheless, the more complete the words were written, the more pleased the receivers would be as they did not have to painstakingly figure out what the word said.

The interaction being analyzed took place in school domain. It meant it involved typical participants, namely a student and a teacher. It occurred in a typical setting, i.e. school. The topics under discussion were school-related. Seeing these, it can be concluded that the nature of the existing interaction should be formal. The participants involved were not of equal status; power difference thus comes into play because one party has more power than the other. Even if both parties were close, social distance was still in existence due to age and status differences. The students as the ones having less power should pay some amount of respect through his/her languages. Accordingly, the student who initiated the interaction should respect the interlocutor by being modest, tactful, and avoid intruding on him/her.

From the twelve Indonesian text messages which were collected, it was found that most of the messages had observed politeness features. The senders remembered to greet the receivers and use proper address terms, even though sometimes the greetings and the address terms used were in a different language. For instance, as shown in [1] and [2], they used *Selamat pagi, Maam*; *Selamat malam, Miss*; or *Selamat siang, Bu*. Greetings are essential in an interaction because it may serve two functions. It is the requirements of phatic communication, to create bond for a social contact, acknowledging that one exists. Furthermore, they open a way for further interaction (Chaika, 1989: 32).

Some of the senders remember to say *maaf* or *maaf mengganggu*, which showed that they realized that they were about to perform an FTA and would intrude on the person receiving the message. Another evidence of the senders' awareness on the FTA was the use of "thank you", "terima kasih" or "nuwun" as an expression which the senders used to end the messages.

[1] Selamat malam miss, maaf mw tny, besok bisa ktm jam berapa? Nuwun.

[2] Selamat pagi, maam. Maaf mengganggu. Sehubungan dengan feedback dr Ms X minggu lalu, ada yang perlu saya konsultasikan. Apakah ada waktu, Maam? Terima kasih.

Meanwhile, there were a few of the senders who employed casual style in the greeting, as seen in [3]. The sender used 'Met malam' instead of "Selamat malam." In addition to the casual greetings, casual style in the content of the messages also appeared. In [4], to perform a request, the sender used question tag to insist on his/her wish.

[3] Met malam Ms. bsk ada bimbingan atau tdk?

[4] Selamat malam Miss. Ini A. Saya mau daftar buat konsultasi Research Methods. Bisa kan Miss?

Politeness issues emerged when the senders used inappropriate dictions or expressions to express his/her requests. For example, in [3], the sender used a direct question *Besok ada bimbingan atau tidak?* A better way would be asking "Apakah besok ada bimbingan?" A similar case was

illustrated in [5], in which the sender asked “besok ada waktu luang utk konsultasi?” In [6], the sender said “saya ingin miss cek sebentar.” This message indicated that the sender did not realize that his/her request was an FTA. It would have been more acceptable and would have saved the receiver’s face if the senders had said “saya minta tolong ...”

[5] Good afternoon Miss X, besok ada waktu luang utk konsultasi? Terima kasih.

[6] Selamat malam, Miss X. Power point saya sudah selesai. Kalau boleh, saya ingin miss cek sebentar. Terima kasih Miss. Happy Sunday!

The use of inappropriate expressions was shown in [7] and [8]. Although the intended actions were the same, the ways they were expressed would influence how the receivers would react. “Apakah besok Ibu ada waktu untuk berbicara dengan saya?” implied that the sender positioned himself or herself higher than the receiver, and it obviously threatened the receiver’s face. Setting the time instead of asking the receiver’s availability would also threaten face.

[7] Selamat siang Bu. Saya ingin bertemu dengan Ibu besok untuk membicarakan skripsi saya. Apakah besok Ibu ada waktu untuk berbicara dengan saya? Mungkin tidak lama, hanya sekitar 10 menit. Terima kasih.

[8] Selamat malam Ms. Besok saya mau konsul skripsi jam 2, apakah ada waktu Ms?

The most severe problem found in the Indonesian text messages in the study was shown in [9]. In this message, the sender was pushy despite his/her saying “minta tolong” as s/he directly requested something without considering the receiver’s situations and was very straightforward in his/her message content.

[9] Bu Y, sy mnt tolong bsk diluankan wkt utk bimbingan krn sy hrs maju bulan feb..tdk bs diundur lg.. sy mnt pengertian ibu. Terima kasih.

Eighteen text messages written in English were gathered and analyzed. Some of the messages were classified since polite as they had observed politeness features. Like polite Indonesian text messages, the senders employed greetings to open the interchange. The senders also used appropriate address term, such as *Miss*, *Ms*, or *Sir* to pay respect to the people to whom they sent the messages, as seen in [10]. These address terms were used for power recognition. It showed that the senders made use of negative politeness. Some of the senders even felt the need to reveal their identity by mentioning their name, such as in [11], assuming that the receiver may not know who the senders were. At the end of the interchange, the senders also expressed gratitude.

[10] Good evening Ms B, may I have a thesis consultation tomorrow? Thanks in advance :)

[11] Morning miss D,, This is C. I just wonder if you have time to see my final paper today..When should I come to your office, Miss? Thank you.

When any inconvenience had happened on the receiver’s part, the senders also acknowledged it and they also asked for an apology. As to the content of their messages which were mostly questions or requests, the senders employed negative politeness strategies in that they apologized for something they were about to say. It exhibited their awareness that they were about to impose on others. These features were shown in [12]-[14].

[12] Miss B, I’m so sorry to disturb you. I’m A. As I said last Wednesday I had submitted my PKMM in your pigeon hole. Would you mind checking it? I do really your advices for improvement. Thanks.



[13] Good morning Miss. Sorry to interrupt your morning. I'd like to ask you whether you have free time tomorrow for consultation. Thank you.

[14] Miss, A and I plan to meet you if it is possible and not bothering. We want to ask your signature for our scholarship. Thank you miss.

Unlike the Indonesian messages, the English messages gathered in the study demonstrated more politeness problems. There were language features in the text messages which did not conform to politeness theories. The senders' possession of sociolinguistic competence was questioned.

In [15]-[16], the senders did not establish a good connection first with the receiver by making an opening; out of the blue they came up with the content. They were found to be very straightforward, and did not take caution to use greetings and address terms, nor did they say *sorry* or *thank you*. This situation was not favorable because the receiver felt that s/he was not acknowledged properly and not connected with the sender.

In these messages the senders did not seem to recognize status difference and power relation that existed between them and the receivers. Even though some smiley emoticon was inserted and the sender said sorry like in [15] and [16] respectively, it did not make the messages more polite. The senders should have worded them differently. For example, instead of using a direct question s/he can use an indirect one. Hence, [16] can be rewritten as *I am wondering if we can make a new appointment*.

[15] Are you available on Wednesday? :)

[16] I'm really sorry for the inconvenience that I couldn't make it for a consultation yesterday. I had something to take care of. Can we rearrange the meeting? Thank you.

Another problem that appeared in the messages seemed to be caused by poor diction or ignorance. The senders in [17] and [18] placed themselves equal to the receiver, or even higher. Message [17] can be rewritten as *Where can I meet you?* and [18] can be rewritten as *I am wondering if you have time. I would like to ask for your signature or I'd like to know if I can see you to ask for your signature*.

[17] Morning maam. Where would we meet? In your office?

[18] Good day Miss. I'm wondering if you have time to meet me for your signature. If you do, would you let me know when? Thx Miss.

Another issue with status and power differences was found in [19]-[22]. The senders assumed equal or higher power than that of the interlocutor. They did not mitigate the imposition they made, despite the existence of 'polite features' in the messages, such as the use of greetings, address terms, and expressions of gratitude. They thought that they had more control over the interaction and did not realize that they should have asked for an apology due to the inconvenience they had caused.

[19] Good afternoon. I would come at 14.50 because my bike's chain is being repaired. Thank you.

[20] Mam, my motorcycle broke down. I am still on t way. Late.

[21] Miss this is A. Where are you? I've been waiting.

When a sender expressed directives, the language used was often too direct and straightforward. They used imperatives, which were the least polite form of directives. The senders talked as if to their subordinates and tended to be task-oriented, as seen in [22]. After notifying the teacher that s/he had submitted his or her thesis draft, s/he continued by saying "Please check it",

which was actually unnecessary. Teachers know their job, without their students telling them. As a matter of fact, by mentioning that s/he had submitted a draft, it implied that what followed should be the teacher's giving the student feedback. The existence of 'please' in that message, nonetheless, did not make the message more polite.

[22] I have put my draft in ur box. Please check it.

Messages containing impolite features would result in irritation, annoyance, and contempt on the receivers' part, i.e. the teachers. The senders, regardless of the linguistic competence they had, showed an absence of sociolinguistic competence. They were unaware of the social relationship with the interlocutors. They did not recognize existing social distance as well as status and power differences. As the interaction took place in the school domain, which was formal, the language employed should have reflected appropriate possession of power resulting from the social role that each of the participants held, which was teacher-student relationship. In reality, conversely, many students were communicating as if they were equals. Consequently, they selected inappropriate forms of language which did not abide by politeness features and made the interlocutors uncomfortable.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Politeness is a very important principle in communication. It employs devices to show certain relationships to other people as well as attitudes toward them. In expressing an FTA in written communication, for instance, a good advice will be to take longer effort to express it in order to mitigate imposition. It means longer sentences would be more preferred.

From the study it was found that some of the analyzed messages had employed polite features; however, the majority of the messages had politeness issues as they contained features which did not conform to politeness theories. The same situations happened to both Indonesian and English messages. Yet, in terms of the number of problems, English messages were found to have more problems. This may be due to the nature of the language, which was not the senders' L1, and the senders' less familiarity with the culture of the foreign language.

Many students were not aware of social distance, roles and status, and power relations. They were communicating as if they were equals, or even some of them placed themselves higher than the interlocutors. The phenomenon resulted in many teachers becoming annoyed and irritated by the messages. In a nutshell, such students were concluded to have a lack of sociolinguistic competence due to their failure to recognize the existing social distance and power differences between the two parties.

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