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Dominance, Deference, and Egalitarianism in Organizational Interaction: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Power and Politeness

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This paper is noteworthy for the way it articulates "politeness" theory and for drawing the attention of organization scholars to the new insights which can be gained through linguistic and sociolinguistic analyses.

Arie Y. Lewin

Abstract

Organizational literature has long presumed that power is communicated and enacted through behaviors exchanged at the level of face-to-face interaction. Little research, however, has investigated this aspect of power. The author explores how power is embedded in manners of speech exchanged in everyday interaction among superiors and subordinates. He draws upon the sociolinguistic theory of "politeness." Politeness, linguistic behaviors used to demonstrate regard and consideration for others, is hypothesized to be sensitive to the social distribution of power. Low power actors are most likely to use linguistic politeness behaviors because such behaviors minimize the possibility of conflict with superiors. Results of a laboratory study confirm that politeness behaviors are sensitive to the distribution of formal authority in organizations. When superiors use politeness, they are more likely than subordinates to employ a subtype of politeness that demonstrates consideration by intimating social familiarity and camaraderie. The hypothesis that egalitarian values moderate the overall effect of power politeness is not supported, perhaps because of the constraints of the experimental situation.

Overall, the study demonstrates how abstractions such as authority and equality can be measured in terms of the manners of comportment that actors bring to bear on one another in face-to-face contexts. Given the possibility that egalitarianism can be operationalized at a linguistic level of analysis, the findings have important ramifications for the study of the presumed status leveling associated with programs of workplace participation. The study broadly shows how sociolinguistic perspectives can contribute to our understanding of organizational phenomena.

(*Power*; *Language*; *Egalitarian*; *Politeness*)

Formal authority is not merely an abstraction that hovers above actors as they engage in daily interaction. Goffman's (1959, 1967, 1983) dramaturgical view of face-to-face association, for instance, suggests that superiors and subordinates communicate and display their relative power through patterns of everyday face-to-face activity. The organizational literature broadly acknowledges that status relations are so enacted. Supervisors are said to treat their subordinates in an "authoritarian manner," with subordinates in turn "deferring" to their superiors. Thus, "the subordinate must extend to the boss a certain ritual deference . . . he must follow the boss's lead in conversation, must not speak out of turn at meetings, must laugh at his boss's jokes while not making jokes of his own that upstage his boss, must not rib the boss for his foibles" (Jackall 1988, p. 19).

Although such role behaviors are acknowledged to occur, little research has sought to identify how roles of superior and subordinate are enacted through specific interactional mechanisms or behaviors. Studies outside the area of organizational research point to micro behavioral cues that signal status differentials, such as gaze (Mazur 1980), interruptions (West 1984), touch

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(Argyle 1969), the distribution of actors' time (Schwartz 1977), of joking and laughter (Coser 1959), and of conversational interruptions (Tannen 1993). However, those studies have not integrated such variables into a wider view of how roles of superior and subordinate are enacted in organizational settings. Perhaps more important is the fact that linguistic behaviors, the most common and most information-rich set of behaviors used in superior/subordinate interchange, have been almost entirely overlooked.

Drawing on the sociolinguistic model of "politeness" behaviors (Brown and Levinson 1987), this article reports the results of a laboratory study designed to illustrate how formal authority is manifested in linguistic gestures used by subordinates and superiors throughout everyday face-to-face interaction. Brown and Levinson's work on politeness is well recognized in the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and anthropology, yet it has not been applied in organizational studies. Whereas the everyday connotation of politeness (as used by Emily Post (1992)) is often likened to a social nicety or interactional gratuity, politeness as conceptualized here is a much more fundamental constituent of human interaction. Politeness behaviors are vital to the mediation of friction in face-to-face exchange. They are also, as the study shows, integral to the regulation of status-related interaction. Beyond applying politeness to the study of power relations, the article discusses how the model of politeness can be applied to the study of behavioral egalitarianism. That is, it examines how attempts at status leveling in organizations may be manifested in actual modes of linguistic usage exchanged among actors. It more generally explores how sociolinguistic data and levels of analysis can be meaningfully applied to topics and streams of research in organizational studies that are typically addressed through other analytic approaches.

A Conceptual Model of Politeness Behavior

Politeness theory is rooted in the concept of face, the positive value individuals claim for the public self they present (Goffman 1959, 1967, 1983). Face is highly emotionally invested; it can be lost. Hence face and face maintenance play a pivotal role in all social interaction. Goffman's work emphasizes how individuals continually engage in presentational work designed to bolster and maintain their own face. Here, however, the emphasis is on how individuals continually engage in interactional support work designed to show consideration for, and to bolster and preserve, the face of others. Politeness comprises one major aspect of such interactional support work. Broadly defined, and because it refers to linguistic behaviors, "politeness" means "phrasing things in such as way as to take into consideration the other person's feelings" (Brown and Gilman 1989).

One can actually predict where politeness behaviors are likely to be most important and thus salient in interaction sequences. The critical interactional junctures that foster interpersonal conflict are labeled "face-threatening acts" (hereafter FTAs). These events involve collisions of personalities, of wants, of opinions, and even of physical bodies. Such face-threatening acts, which recur throughout social interaction, include acts of contradicting, criticizing, disagreeing, interrupting, imposing, borrowing, asking a favor, requesting information, embarrassing, physical bumping, etc. Given the generalized social expectation that the face of others be preserved, politeness is the vehicle whereby actors mitigate or defray any real or imagined face threats that they have occasion to perform. Specifically, when actors have occasion to "perform" an FTA toward another individual, they at the same time employ politeness behaviors calculated to mitigate or to defray the FTA. Because FTAs vary in degree of severity, politeness behaviors also vary in their degree of defrayal. Brown and Levinson (1987) postulate a ranked array of polite linguistic behaviors that actors draw upon. An actor's choice among these polite behaviors is modeled in Figure 1. In accordance with decision theory, these choices are referred to as strategies.

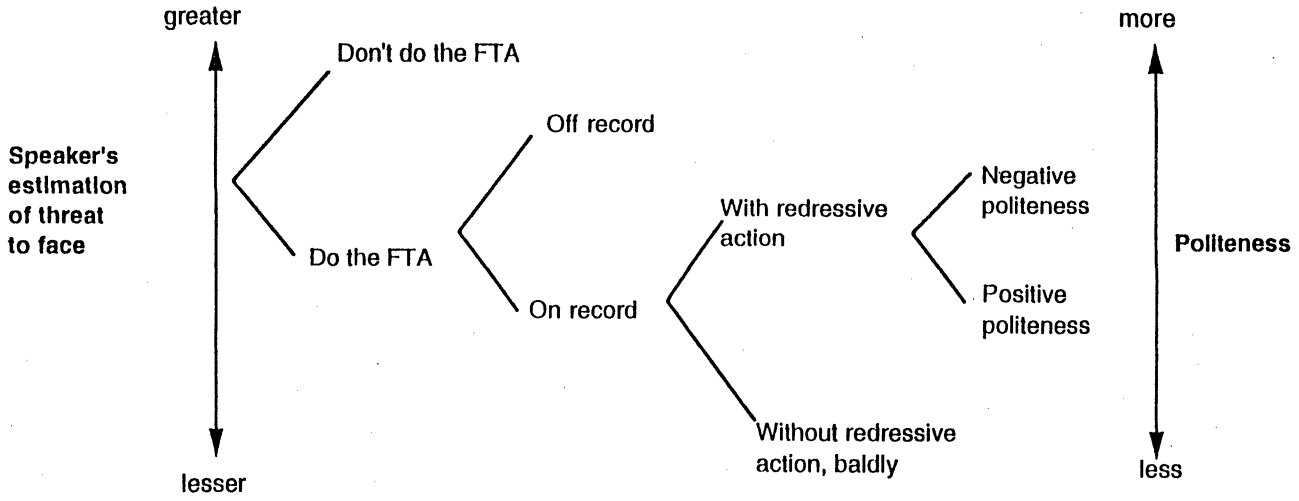
Do Not Do the FTA

According to Figure 1, when an actor's interactional purpose or goal calls for the performance of an FTA, he or she first chooses whether to perform the FTA. For example, if person A wants to borrow a dollar from person B (an act that presumes access to B's property, thus threatening B's autonomy and self-determination and hence his or her face). A might choose to say nothing and thereby entirely avoid a threat to B's face.

Go Off Record

Should A decide to do the FTA, that is, to make some linguistic attempt to get B to lend a dollar, A may go "off record." This strategy makes it impossible to attribute one clear communicative intention to what the speaker says. For example, if A says to B, while peering into an empty wallet, "Gee, I should have gone to the bank this morning," the hearer cannot know with certainty that a distinct request has been uttered. By using a hint or ambiguous construction, the requestor might

Figure 1 **Flowchart of Politeness Strategies and Tactics Ordered Against Estimated Threat to Face**
Adapted from Brown and Levinson 1987



be asking the hearer to do X yet could also credibly claim that he or she intended not the FTA, but something entirely different.

Go on Record Baldly

Person A may choose to go "on record," that is, to state the FTA in a way that makes his or her communicative intentions unambiguous. One strategy here is to go baldly on record, to state the FTA in a curt, brusque, blunt way, making no attempt to soften or ameliorate its face-threatening thrust. This strategy poses the highest degree of threat to B's face. The statement may be cast in the imperative form, the grammatical mood that expresses a direct command: "Give me a dollar." Speakers might also threaten the face of a hearer in an intentional and conspicuous manner by using markets of derogation or aggravation, such as "That was *stupid*" and "Why *in the world* did you do that?"

Go on Record with Redressive Action

In going on record with redressive action, the speaker also communicates his or her intention unambiguously. The distinction here is that the speaker embeds the FTA in redressive language that mitigates, in either a small or a large way, its force. Some linguistic attempt is made to take the feelings of the hearer into consideration. This strategy is the most commonly used and is the most linguistically diverse. Specific types of redressive language that actors use to mitigate their speech are "negative politeness" and "positive politeness," here called "tactics" because they represent distinctive instances of one specific strategy. Negative politeness tactics work by recognizing or establishing social distance between speaker and hearer. Positive politeness tactics work by insinuating or establishing a sense of commonality and familiarity between speaker and hearer. Tables 1 and 2 list and give examples of negative and positive politeness tactics, respectively.

Negative tactics occur with greater frequency in speech. Many are recognizable by their association with common notions of politeness. Ritual courtesies such as "excuse me," "pardon me," "sorry to bother you, but..." (tactic 7) convey avoidance. These expressions give wide berth to the territory of the hearer. Similarly, negative tactic 9 entails use of the past tense when the present tense is grammatically and pragmatically correct: "I *had been thinking* of asking if I could borrow your car." Such phrasing shifts the speaker's intent "as if" into the past and thus shifts the infringement on the hearer's autonomy into the future, thereby reducing the degree of face threat involved (Fillmore 1975, Lakoff 1974). Another negative tactic (2) entails use of verbal hedges, whereby speakers avoid committing themselves to the intent of their own speech act (Lakoff 1974, Fraser and Nolen 1981). Typical constructions are "Could I *maybe* ask you a question?," "I *wonder* if your could...?," and "Will you give me a moment, *if it's not too much trouble?*." Because hedges diminish the force of a speech act, they function to preserve the personal territory of the hearer from infringement.

Whereas negative politeness works by voicing noninfringement and avoidance, positive politeness redresses face threats by invoking a claim of solidarity between

Table 1 Tactics of Negative Politeness

	Tactic	Example
1.	Use indirect questions such as inquiries into the header's ability or willingness to comply.	"Can you tell me what time it is?"
2.	Use hedges, words or phrases that diminish the force of a speech act.	"Can I perhaps trouble you?"
3.	Use the subjunctive to express pessimism about the hearer's ability or willingness to comply.	"Could I ask you a question?"
4.	Use words or phrases that minimize the imposition.	"I need just a little of your time."
5.	Give deference by using honorifics such as "Sir" or "Mister."	"Can I help you, Sir."
6.	Use formal word choices to indicate seriousness and to establish social distance.	"Could you tolerate a slight imposition on my part?"
7.	Apologize: admit the impingement, express reluctance.	"I am sorry to bother you, but..."
8.	Impersonalize the speaker and hearer by avoiding the pronouns "I" and "you."	"Is it possible to request a favor?"
9.	Use the past tense to create distance in time.	"I had been wondering if I could ask a favor."
10.	Nominalize (change verbs into adjectives or nouns) to diminish speaker's active participation in commission of the FTA.	"My asking you to leave is required by regulations."

speaker and hearer, through gestures that indicate common interests, attitudes, or mind sets. For example, one might employ "in-group" speech: linguistic forms generally associated with speech among intimates (see Ervin-Tripp 1972, Joos 1962). Thus, positive tactic 2 entails use of phonological slurring to convey in-group membership. Phonological slurring refers to standardized ways of incompletely enunciating words or work phrases, as in "Hey, *how'ya doin*'?," "*Gimme* the wrench, *willya*?," and "*Wanna* dance?." Such speech has been studied intensively by sociolinguists (Labov 1972) and found to be associated with casual, intimate social contexts, or with attempts to create such contexts. The distinction between "Hey" and "Hello" and between "How'ya doin'?" and "How are you doing?" is therefore far from trivial; it communicates significant information regarding speaker's assumptions about his or her relation to the hearer. The model of politeness suggests that although such speech forms are standard in exchange between intimates, a person who has occasion to perform an FTA might implant such "in-group" phraseology within the performance of the FTA. Another positive tactic, number 9, entails use of an inclusive form, "we" or "us." A speaker might say "Where did *we* put that book?" when really meaning "Where did *you* put that book?." The inclusive form places speaker and hearer in the same role, thereby suggesting they share similar outlooks and responsibilities. Such an air of cooperation softens friction that might arise from one actor's performance of an FTA toward another.

In Figure 1, positive politeness is ranked as less polite than negative politeness because when one is in doubt, avoidance and circumspection are a safer tactic than the assertion of commonality. By implying that one has something in common with the hearer and that one understands, appreciates, and is familiar with the hearer's personal wants, one risks taking a privilege that the hearer may be unwilling to grant. To be sure, "Excuse me, sir, could I trouble you for a match?" and "Hey Mac, gotta light?" are both more polite than the bald on-record "give me a match," yet each construction represents a different assumption about the relation between speaker and hearer. The negatively polite form recognizes an imposition and tries to mitigate it whereas the positively polite form is more venture-

Table 2 Tactics of Positive Politeness

	Tactic	Example
1.	Notice the hearer's admirable qualities or possessions, show interest, exaggerate.	"Nice to see you, hey really love your new car, can I borrow it sometime?"
2.	Employ phonological slurring to convey in-group membership.	"Heya, gimme a hand willya?"
3.	Use colloqialisms or slang to convey in-group membership.	"I know I seem like a stick-in-the-mud, but what the hell."
4.	Use ellipsis (omission) to communicate tacit understandings.	[Do you] "Mind if I smoke?"
5.	Use first name or in-group name to insinuate familiarity.	"Hey Bud, have you gotta minute?"
6.	Claim common point of view: speaker asserts knowledge of hearer's wants or asserts that hearer has knowledge of speaker's wants.	"You know how the janitors don't like it when..."
7.	Give reasons: assert reflexivity by making activity seem reasonable to the hearer.	"I'm really late for an important appointment, so..."
8.	Use inclusive forms such as "we" or "let's" to include both speaker and hearer in the activity.	"We're not feeling well, are we?"
9.	Assert reciprocal exchange or tit for tat.	"Do me this favor, and I'll make it up to you."
10.	Give something desired (gifts, sympathy, understanding).	"You look like you've had a rough week."

some. This form intimates that, because of a bond of solidarity, no imposition exists.

Politeness and Power Relations

According to Figure 1, speakers' choice of polite usage varies with their estimate of the risk to face. Power is a variable that is thought to increase the perceived seriousness of an FTA for two interrelated reasons. First, high-status individuals are often considered more vital to the achievement of group or organizational goals than low-status individuals. Hence, superiors' time, territory, and emotional well being must be protected from threat or encroachment. The face of superiors, as an extension of their overall contribution to the organization, has greater worth and hence is accorded greater consideration than the face of subordinates. Second, superiors have the ability to punish, sanction, or otherwise exercise control over outcomes important to subordinates. Because of a such a dependency, relation, subordinates strive to remain in the good graces of superiors. Subordinates take great care in addressing a superior to avoid possible provocation or seeming impertinence; they are mindful and solicitous of the feelings of superiors because of fear. Although superiors certainly use politeness, the contention here is that subordinates use it more.

H1. *Speakers low in power relative to their addressee will tend to use greater amounts of politeness, in comparison to speakers high in relative power.*

Recall that positive politeness is considered less polite than negative politeness. Low power actors would therefore be less likely than high power actors to use positive tactics. The normative distribution of behaviors in our society reinforces such a contention; social superiors in American culture often engage in consideration by "coming close" to and showing familiarity with the territories of others. In American settings, superiors address subordinates by first name whereas subordinates often address superiors by a title and last name (Brown and Ford 1964, Morand 1994, Slobin et al. 1968). The pattern recurs in other routine behavior, such as in the distribution of greeting forms, of joking and laughter (Coser 1959, West 1984), and of touch rights (Argyle 1969). In European and many other

languages the asymmetry recurs in rules of pronoun exchange. For example, in Spanish the familiar tu form used between intimates is also used to speak "down." Applying this logic to the formulation of other positively polite utterances, we can well imagine a superior saying to a subordinate: "Hi Joe, how's it goin'? Hey, do me a favor willya?" in a light, friendly, bantering way. Less easy to imagine is a subordinate using the same linguistic form to a superior. Therefore:

H2. *Low power speakers are less likely than high power speakers to use positive politeness.*

Note: H2 pertains to positive politeness because superiors have the "right" to employ such language (in the sense that role behaviors are often discussed in terms of specific sets of rights and obligations). A corresponding right to employ negative politeness is not applicable to low power actors. Both low and high power actors freely draw upon negative tactics.

The term "egalitarian" broadly defines a relation among equals. Because some vertical division of labor is always present in organizations (Simon 1964), the term is commonly applied to organizations that deemphasize or downplay formal status differentials. Such egalitarianism among organizational actors may be accomplished through greater parity of pay and perquisites, the equalization of parking spaces, office space, cafeteria access, dress, and so forth (Lawler 1990, Pfeffer 1994). However, many descriptions of egalitarianism explicitly encompass interactional etiquette, the very manners of comportment exchanged among actors. A progressive organization, by claiming that its superiors and subordinates enjoy egalitarian relations, may mean that they "treat" one another with relatively equivalent levels of regard, relating to one another as on an equal footing. It is only logical that superiors and subordinates in such an egalitarian relation would exchange more equivalent behavioral cues. Hence, although it is supposed that in general one speaks more politely to higher status individuals, egalitarianism is postulated to exert a moderating effect on the demonstration of power. The suggestion here is that organizations generate values and behavioral norms that so moderate power's general effect on politeness.

Hofstede's (1980) concept of "power distance" provides an example of how divergent sets of beliefs and behavioral rules are presumed to guide the staging of status in the arena of face-to-face contact. According to Hofstede, groups with "small" power distance norms believe that displays of inequality should be minimized, that persons in power should try to "look" less powerful than they are, and that "hierarchy means an inequality of roles, established for convenience." For individuals in groups with "large" power distance norms, "hierarchy means existential inequality"; cultural norms prescribe that power differentials be salient and visibly articulated in social interaction (Hofstede 1980). Hofstede used power distance to draw comparisons across national cultures, but such values may also vary across organizations. Accordingly, members of an organization with low power distance (egalitarian) norms would treat one another with mutual respect regardless of differences in formal status; a more authoritarian organization would evidence asymmetries consistent with the preceding hypotheses. Hence:

H3. *Speakers in a egalitarian organization are more symmetric in their exchange of politeness behaviors than speakers in an authoritarian organization.*

Power and Politeness in a Laboratory Setting

As no prior organizational studies have investigated politeness, a laboratory experiment was designed to demonstrate the hypothesized relations under controlled conditions.

Subjects

Forty male and 44 female subjects were drawn in roughly equal numbers from two populations thought to differ along an egalitarian/authoritarian dimension. One population consisted of students in an undergraduate department of social work and the other of students in an MBA program, both at the same university. Processes of self-selection were presumed to operate such that people with disparate values would tend to choose one program rather than the other (Schneider 1987). The two schools were also thought to socialize students to have disparate values along the authoritarian/egalitarian dimension, which in turn would influence comportment in interpersonal relations. Two populations were chosen to avoid any overt experimental manipulation of egalitarianism, for such would impose obvious demand characteristics for subjects to attend to and thus trivialize any positive results. To test for the postulated difference, subjects were asked after their participation in the experiment to agree or disagree with the following two questions on a 7-point Likert scale: "It is important to speak to others in the same way, regardless of what their status is" and "We should treat those who have less power than ourselves

no differently from how we treat those with greater power." Means for the two questions were 2.81/3.52 and 2.32/3.23, respectively; the correlation between the two scores was 0.78. One-tailed t-tests showed that members of the two groups held significantly different views ($p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.002$, respectively), with MBAs more likely to disagree on both questions.

Procedure

Subjects engaged in role playing that involved performing an FTA. Subjects were asked to imagine the given characteristics of their addressee and to enact the role as if with that person. Use of such a "hypothetical other" enabled characteristics of the addressee to be held constant from scenario to scenario, whereas a live respondent might have unwittingly communicated subtle nonverbal cues to influence speakers' performance. The hypothetical addressee was designated as a man in all cases to avoid the possibility of confounding based on subjects' attributions. Four different role plays were employed. To ensure reasonably uncomplicated comparison across scenarios, all scenarios took the broad form of directives, that is, any linguistic attempt by one actor to get another actor to do something (Searle 1969). Because both high and low power actors would perform each scenario, the directives were constructed to provide interchangeability across levels of power (one could not, for instance, ask one's subordinate for a raise). The following scenario is an example.

> You are away from your office, in an entirely different area of the building. You need to make a telephone call. It happens that there is only one telephone nearby, and it is a pay phone. Unfortunately, [name and organizational title of the hearer inserted here] is using the phone. You have been waiting for over ten minutes, you want to use the phone. What will you say?

The other scenarios involved interrupting a conversation and asking for information about where a certain meeting is being held, asking someone who has taken a chair you had saved with your coat prior to a meeting to give you back your seat, and reminding someone to bus his or her own tray at a company cafeteria where the norm of tray busing is well known.

Power was operatinalized as formal organizational status. The instructions asked subjects to address hearers designated as either two levels higher or two levels lower than themselves in an organization hierarchy. Each subject performed all four roles in randomized order. However, status was not manipulated within subjects. One half of the subjects ($n = 41$) addressed higher status hearers in all four roles and the other half ($n = 43$) addressed lower status hearers. Because subjects always spoke only up or only down throughout their role playing, they were not aware that status was a manipulated variable and hence did not alter their speech on the basis of awareness of variation in status. After the experiment, a manipulation check was conducted. Subjects were asked to indicate whether they felt they had addressed individuals of higher status, lower status, or equivalent status. The results clearly indicated that the power manipulation was successful.

Measurement of Politeness

One measure of politeness was compiled by coding each transcript to the four strategies of politeness defined in this article. Because the strategies were mutually exclusive and formed an exhaustive typology, every speech act could be, and was, assigned to one of the four strategies (do not do the FTA, off record, on record baldly, on record with redressive action). To determine reliability, the author and another individual coded a sample of 40 speech acts according to the four strategies. Both coders were blind to the treatment condition of the subjects. Four cases of disagreement were examined and the coding criteria were discussed. The coding of a second sample resulted in complete agreement between coders. All of the remaining speech acts were coded by both individuals and any disagreements were resolved by consensus.

Speech acts coded as "on record with redressive action" were classified further. The additional coding was done because that set of speech acts showed wide variation in terms of politeness. For instance, "Can I have my seat back?" is an on-record redressive construction, but so is:

> I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but prior to your sitting there I had been there. I had put my coat on that chair to reserve it while I visited a friend across the room. Could I possibly ask you for the chair back?

Consequently, to capture the wide range of tone, six separate judges assigned each on-record redressive speech act a score of one through five, based on the degree of politeness present. Judges used a Likert type scale ranging from "barely polite" to "extremely polite." The degree of politeness of each on-record redressive speech act was calculated as the mean score for all six judges. Cronbach's alpha was 0.85, indicating the six judges were reasonably similar in their assessment of relative politeness.

All on-record redressive speech acts were examined further for their frequency of use of specific positive

politeness tactics. A second coder and the author independently coded the entire corpus of such speech acts for instances of the positive tactics (see Table 2; for details of the specification of politeness, see Morand (1991)). Inter-rater reliability was calculated by using coefficient kappa (see Jones et al. 1983), a nonparametric measure of inter-rater reliability that takes into account agreements due to chance. For two tactics where the kappa was below 0.80, the raters' discussion of disagreement led to more clearly specified definitions of the tactics. Two different raters were then asked independently to identify those two tactics among a larger sample of speech acts. The resulting reliability scores all exceeded 0.80.

Results

Power's Effect on the Overall Politeness of Speech

The data clearly indicate that subjects systematically varied their speech according to their perception of the social distribution of power, supporting H1. Table 3 reports frequency of strategy usage by power of speaker. Across all four scenarios, persons in high power positions chose not to do the FTA on only five occasions, whereas subjects who were forced to speak "up" did so on 17 occasions. High status subjects went off record a total of four times, whereas subjects with low power went off record 27 times. In contrast to low status subjects, high status subjects were more likely to go on record baldly. High status subjects used this maximally impolite approach on 41 occasions and low status individuals did so on only 8 occasions.

Subjects not only responded to power differentials when deciding to avoid an FTA or to go on record baldly, but also extended their speech variation to the use of linguistic subtleties. Table 4 reports the results of an analysis of variance that used as a dependent measure only the scores produced by the six judges of the on-record redressive speech acts.[1] Strong support for H1 is evident in each scenario (requesting the location of a *meeting*, $p < 0.005$; requesting ones' *chair* back, $p < 0.05$; requesting that someone remove a lunch *tray* from a table, $p < 0.0001$; requesting to use a *phone*, $p < 0.0001$). Power's effect was in the direction predicted by H1: subordinates were more polite than superiors. (The means for scenarios were: meeting 2.93/3.97; chair 2.60/3.57; tray 2.51/3.46; phone 2.63/3.72). Apparently, when one person says "could I..." and another says "can I," or when one party says "I wanted..." and another says "I want...," a social relationship has been encoded and an allocation of status has been created or reinforced in however small an increment.

Table 3 Frequencies of Politeness Strategies by Power of Speaker

Strategy of Politeness	Power of Speaker: High	Power of Speaker: Low
On Record Baldly	41	8
On Record with Redressive Action	122	112
Off Record	4	27
Do Not Do the FTA	5	17

Chi-square = 46.097, $p < 0.0001$.

Power as a License for Using Positive Politeness

H2 predicts that superiors would use positive politeness more frequently than subordinates because it is culturally improper for underlings to assume more intimacy or commonality than a specific relationship allows. Table 5 shows that the frequency of most indices of positive politeness differed significantly across the two levels of power. Significant differences were found for tactic 1, notice the hearer, show interest ($p < 0.01$); tactic 2, use phonological slurring ($p <$

Table 4 Analysis of Variance Showing the Effects of Power and Group Membership on the Politeness of a Request in Four Scenarios

Scenario	Source	d.f.	SS	MS	F
Meeting	Power	1	19.30	19.30	14.78**
	Group	1	0.06	0.06	0.04
	Power × Group	1	0.66	0.66	0.51
	Error	78	101.89	1.31	
Chair	Power	1	6.65	6.65	7.94*
	Group	1	0.24	0.24	0.28
	Power × Group	1	0.06	0.06	0.07
	Error	31	25.98	0.84	
Tray	Power	1	13.95	13.95	22.58***
	Group	1	1.56	1.56	2.52
	Power × Group	1	0.78	0.78	1.26
	Error	66	40.84	0.62	
Phone	Power	1	14.07	14.07	33.33***
	Group	1	0.03	0.03	0.08
	Power × Group	1	0.51	0.51	1.21
	Error	43	18.15	0.42	

*$p < 0.05$
**$p < 0.005$
***$p < 0.0001$

Table 5 Frequency of Positive Politeness Tactics by Power of Speaker

Tactics	Power of Speaker HIGH	LOW	d.f.	Chi Square
1. Notice Hearer	27	8	1	8.86**
2. Phonological Slurring	25	5	1	11.80***
3. Colloquialisms	17	4	1	7.05**
4. Ellipsis	18	5	1	6.36**
5. Firstname	39	9	1	16.45****
6. Claim Common View	23	9	1	5.06*
7. Give Reasons	43	32	1	0.86
8. Use Inclusive Forms	6	0	1	5.54*
9. Assert Reciprocity	7	0	1	6.46**
10. Give Something Desired	8	3	1	1.89

*$p < 0.02$
**$p < 0.01$
***$p < 0.001$
****$p < 0.0001$

0.001); tactic 3, use colloquialisms or slang ($p < 0.01$); tactic 4 use, ellipsis ($p < 0.01$); tactic 5, use first name or in-group name ($p < 0.0001$); tactic 6, claim common point of view ($p < 0.02$); tactic 8, use inclusive forms ($p < 0.02$); and tactic 9 assert reciprocity ($p < 0.01$). Differences, including those not statistically significant, were in the expected direction. Each index was found more frequently among the utterances of subjects assigned a status higher than that of the conversation partner.

The general pattern of results strongly supports the contention that indices of positive politeness encode a set of speaking rights issued only to social superiors. Furthermore, because most of the indices of positive politeness occurred with considerable frequency, people appear to recognize, however tacitly, a complex array of linguistic devices for reducing social distance. Even in the restricted context of a psychological experiment, positive politeness is much more complex than a simple, "Hi, how's it goin'?."

The Effect of Egalitarianism on Politeness

H3 suggests that in comparison to members of authoritarian groups, members of more egalitarian groups would address each other more nearly equivalent levels of politeness regardless of formal power differentials. As Table 4 indicates, the predicted interaction effect for egalitarianism and power is not significant for any scenario. Hence the notion that the symmetry of polite speech should vary by membership in one population or another receives no support.

One other analysis was performed on the data. Because some cultural stereotypes suggest that women are socialized to be more considerate and hence more polite than men, the responses were analyzed for gender differences in the use of politeness. Gender significantly predicted politeness in only one scenario (tray: $p < 0.005$). This finding is not inconsistent with previous literature on gender-related differences in politeness usage, the results of which have been mixed (Dubois and Crouch 1975, Kramarae et al. 1984, Dubois and Crouch 1975, O'Barr and Atkins 1980).

Discussion

The laboratory study was constructed so as to generate and record relatively naturalistic verbal utterances, yet under conditions sufficiently controlled to afford reasonable comparisons across speech acts and to avoid confounding or extraneous influences. In broad terms, the distribution of politeness observed in the laboratory seems likely to be generalizable to real-life interaction. Indeed, the notion that subordinates exercise greater circumspection and caution in voicing potentially fractious utterances reflects common sense. Yet, the constraints of the laboratory situation are likely to have produced some stiltedness and artificiality in the speech generated. For example, in real life, performing an FTA toward a potentially reactive face may cause speakers to express more politeness than they did toward the imagined face in the experiment. However, this real-life effect would hold for high- and low-power speakers alike; that is, we would anticipate both groups to use even higher levels of politeness in live interaction. Additional contingencies of real-life interaction would be likely to moderate the patterns observed in the laboratory, although without negating the general results. For instance, the observed sharpness of politeness asymmetries may in real life be moderated by the unique history of a given superior/subordinate dyad (e.g., a long-standing versus rather brief social relation), a supervisor's leadership style, and other factors.

If we presume that the results generally hold true, does the general conclusion simply represent a validation of common sense? Perhaps it does to a degree, but a well-recognized virtue of scientific inquiry is its ability to illuminate the realm of common sense. As discussed previously, the literature has not provided any systematic exploration of the communication of power. An exploration of common sense may be especially

pertinent for the realm of language, for many linguistic behaviors are automatic and occur at subliminal levels of awareness. Possibly asymmetries of politeness play a greater role in everyday behavior than we ordinarily realize. Crozier (1973) even suggests that, because of our democratic values, we are uneasy with the exploration of behavioral dominance and deference and tend to suppress our awareness of interactional differences in power. Moreover, to many people, the results for positive politeness are likely to be a step further removed from the realm of common sense.

In the behavioral sciences, it is not uncommon to find a discrepancy between the espoused values and actual behaviors of individuals (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). That fact may account for the lack of results for egalitarianism. Another plausible argument, however, is that the demand characteristics of the role playing overcame any underlying socialization of the subjects. As previously noted, any overt manipulation of egalitarianism was avoided in the experiment to ensure a stringent test of the hypothesis. This quandary suggests the importance of extensions to field settings where eglitarianism might operate at a behavioral level. The leveling of status differentials among superior and subordinate actors in organizations has been one of the most dominant themes of organizational theory over the past 20 years. The literature commonly alludes to egalitarianism at the level of role behaviors, that is, the general manner of interpersonal treatment exchanged among individuals. However, egalitarianism has not been examined previously as a behavioral construct. The study's operationalization of egalitarianism at a behavioral and specifically linguistic level remains logically correct, for if an asymmetric exchange of politeness is an indicator of differential power, equality must be operationalized as the symmetry of politeness. We now have the ability to address this most important issue in a more empirical fashion.

Implications and Future Directions

Overall, the results of the laboratory simulation illustrate one significant way in which organizational status relations are embedded in everyday language behavior. Furthermore, importing the sociolinguistic model of politeness into the domain of organizational studies may draw the attention of organization scholars to the potentially new insights and new interpretations that can be obtained through disciplinary cross-fertilization. A sociolinguistic level of analysis can be fruitfully applied to organizational phenomena and research topics that are more typically addressed by other methodological and conceptual approaches. The following discussion suggests several specific opportunities for application and extension of the findings.

First, polite speech behaviors might prove instrumental in modeling how roles of superior and subordinate are socially constructed and enacted over time. That is, although organizations are often defined in terms of such macrostructural elements as formal authority and the division of labor, scholarship also emphasizes that organizations are socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and reproduced (Giddens 1988) through micro behavioral regularities at the face-to-face level (Barley 1986, Ranson et al. 1980, Silverman 1971). Authors such as Mintzberg (1973) and Kanter (1977) have noted that managers spend most of their day engaged in speech behaviors, speech patterns consisting of many short bursts of talk across a range of individuals. Numerous occasions conducive to the use of politeness, and hence to the reproduction of organizational authority relations would arise in the course of such patterns of managerial activity (interrupting, directing, criticizing, asking favors, etc.). In short, if asymmetric exchanges of politeness occur in daily interaction among superiors and subordinates, the recurrence of many such exchanges among those actors would result in a rather stable interaction order that not only reflects but also reproduces the formal hierarchy on an ongoing basis.

Second, although formal authority is emphasized here, there are many bases and sources of power, and we should realize that individuals are sensitive to power deriving from other sources. What matters is not *where* power originates, but the speaker's perception of his or her influence in relation to the hearer. This perception should affect the perceived degree of face threat and hence the use of politeness routines. Thus, for example, one could use an observation of politeness exchanges to trace the emergence of informal hierarchies such as those classically observed by Dalton (1959).

Third, although the research suggests that power determines politeness, a causality in the opposite direction is possible. That is, one source of power lies in patterns of strategic comportment within the domain of face-to-face interaction itself (Strauss 1978). An individual acting in a bold and assertive manner might conceivably gain interactional leverage; an individual acting in an overly polite or obsequious manner might concede more power than necessary. Whereas the improvidence of using the imperative form to address a CEO is obvious, many nuances of polite behavior are available to enact minor increments or decrements of power. Along the same lines, schemas for detecting

politeness might even prove a useful tool for individuals engaged in process consultation (Schein 1988), where listening to and detecting previously hidden patterns of role behavior can be important.

Fourth, programs of workplace participation and of employee involvement often attempt to engender in supervisors a less authoritarian, more egalitarian manner of interacting with subordinates. Some literature suggests modification in the behaviors of subordinates, for instance, using empowerment to encourage workers to act more assertively (Conger and Kanungo 1988). Here an interesting approach would be to assess such purported changes in role relations at a linguistic level of analysis. We might ask: Do empowered workers voice utterances differently?

Relatedly, the model presented here points to the pivotal role of face in everyday life, especially power-related social intercourse. Face proves to be a construct critical to the study of interactional behavior because it is not susceptible to purely rational analysis. That is, because face is crucial in individuals' identity maintenance and ego enhancement (Becker 1971), face-threatening events always harbor the potential to take on ominous overtones as potential threats to one's self-image or public persona. Understanding the general uncertainty surrounding the treatment of others' face leads us to a more realistic appreciation of the difficulty subordinates may encounter in voicing criticism or disagreement with superiors and, by extension, of why the question of parity in the sphere of face-to-face exchanges with more powerful others is truly a pithy one. Perhaps this difficulty is why some notable companies, such as General Electric (Tichey and Sherman 1993) and Motorola (Hill and Yamada 1992), intentionally cultivate a culture of confrontation and directness, urging employees to voice disagreements and criticisms directly to managers, even providing structured formats for generating employee voice.

Finally, future investigation might also explore the possible role of positive politeness in mediating the tension between status differentiation and egalitarian values within American organizations. Positive politeness appears common in American organizations; managers are expected to maintain a certain "affability quotient," to act familiarly when making the "howdy rounds" in the plant (Sayles and Struss 1977). Former President Bush, in order to appear less remote from and more familiar to his electorate, was rumored to have been coached to selectively employ phonological slurring, as in: "I'm gonna send this bill to Congress, gonna tell'em its their turn, tell'em ta stop talkin' and start movin' on it." The asymmetric use of positive politeness, or of any expression of friendliness or solidarity, seems a particularly fitting escape value for the conflicting pressures of status and equality, for such usage bridges status distance by creating an interpersonal footing based on liking, affiliation, and a sphere of common interests but at the same time replicating status differentiation by regulating the flow of such expression. A subordinate may even savor the consideration offered. Thus, a superior's supportive pat on the back or gentle reassuring grip on the arm seems amicable enough, unless perhaps the subordinate reflects on the fact that he or she cannot easily initiate such a gesture toward a boss. One implication is that positive politeness may play a role in relations deemed to be egalitarian. Such language may even prove an important component of what has typically been described, through survey measures, as "leader consideration" (Fleishman 1973). Again the constructs and measures presented here provide for an empirical, sociolinguistic assessment.

Conclusion

The sociolinguistic model of politeness demonstrates one way in which status relations are encoded in everyday language. Face-threatening acts are strategic interactional windows. If we are able to locate such acts within broader sequences of social interaction, we have the opportunity to observe an important set of linguistic role behaviors that emerge during these critical moments. An observation and analysis of such behaviors gives us insight into underlying attitudes that actors hold toward one another. The resulting data provide important information about the ongoing formulation and expression of organizational roles.

More generally, the study reported here shows the utility of a sociolinguistic approach. The use of linguistic data and levels of analysis has the potential to open new vantage points and new approaches to a variety of organizational research questions. No approach leads to superior truths. However, the choice of analytic approach sometimes has much to do with the conclusions reached. By employing different analytical frameworks for a given set of problems, we can contribute to an understanding of organization phenomena, either through reconciliation of different or contradictory findings or through complementarity of findings.

Endnotes

[1]Although the data are amenable to a repeated measures analysis of variance, given the strong results obtained across each scenario individually, there was no specific need to control for within-subject correlation. The general purpose of the analysis was show that the

results held across each of four comparable yet distinctive face-threatening acts.

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