Linguistic Politeness in Student-Team Emails: Its Impact on Trust Between Leaders and Members

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***Abstract*—*Research Problem*:** *Claims have been made about the impact of applying Linguistic Politeness Theory to workplace contexts. Linguistic politeness theory argues that speakers or senders of messages make language choices to soften potential face-threatening acts. These claims have not been empirically examined in regards to trust between leaders and members.* ***Research Questions*:** *(1) What effect does a leader's use of linguistic politeness have on perceptions of trust? (2) Do indirect and direct requests differ in building trust? (3) Is there an optimal combination of level of directness and type of linguistic politeness strategy in building trust?* ***Literature Review*:** *Previous literature has shown that people in positions of power utilize linguistic politeness when interacting with subordinates. Further, studies have shown an association between managerial communication style and relational variables, including trust. No study, however, has empirically examined a leader's use of linguistic politeness on subordinate's perceptions of trust toward the leader.* ***Methodology*:** *The current study uses a quantitative approach. An experiment was designed to test the effect of politeness on trust. One-hundred fifteen undergraduates were selected for the experiment.* ***Results and Discussion*:** *Quantitative analysis, which included a two-way ANOVA, revealed that participants trusted leaders who used linguistic politeness strategies in their emails, as opposed to those who failed to include mitigating strategies. Furthermore, downgraders, moves that mitigate the force of face-threatening act without adding semantic content, were effective at building trust when paired with direct speech acts. Similarly, supportive moves, moves that mitigate face-threatening acts but do add semantic content, were effective at building trust when paired with indirect speech acts. The results have theoretical implications that include the contextual importance of linguistic politeness strategies. Further, practical implications include the way student leaders might phrase email requests to team members. However, because the sample included students, the results must be carefully interpreted, particularly when extrapolating to professional populations. Future studies can apply a similar methodology to a population of professionals, allowing for a comparison of datasets.*

Index Terms*—*Email communication, experimental design, leader-member relationships, linguistic politeness, team communication, trust.

Linguistic politeness is a system of language choices that speakers use to soften face threats. The theory posits that every individual has face, or a sense of self-worth, that they seek to preserve in interactions. Researchers have extensively studied linguistic politeness in professional contexts, particularly in leader-member relationships. For example, descriptive studies using methods like discourse analysis and conversational analysis have yielded important results regarding politeness in leadership, namely that leaders use a variety of politeness strategies when interacting with subordinates [1]–[4]. Furthermore, studies have provided insight as to why leaders ought to use politeness in interactions with subordinates [5], [6]. However, previous research examining politeness in leader-member relationships has yet to empirically examine exactly how specific politeness strategies impact specific relational variables including trust. Although research in organizational psychology has investigated the impact that communication has on relational variables like trust, these studies measure aspects of communication style using survey instruments, which provide a different perspective than a linguistic perspective [7]. That is, survey instruments that measure aspects of communication rely on self-reporting and focus primarily on the content of a leader's communication, as opposed to content and delivery. Linguistic politeness, however, focuses on both content and delivery. The issue at hand, then, is two fold. First, previous research that falls in the intersection of politeness and leader-member relationships has yet to investigate the causal relationship between politeness and trust. Second, research in organizational psychology has yet to address specific language usage when correlating communication with trust. Therefore, both research traditions could benefit from one another.

The current study addresses the two issues by using an experimental design to combine aspects of linguistic politeness research and organizational psychology research. Further, the study investigates the impact that specific linguistic politeness strategies have on perceptions of trust between leaders and members. The following research questions are addressed in the study:

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RQ1: What effect does a leader's use of linguistic politeness have on perceptions of trust?

The first research question is driven by theoretical notion that linguistic politeness is used to mitigate the force of speech acts and manage relationships [8], [9]. More specifically, it asks, are leaders who take the time and effort to mitigate their communication with subordinates perceived as more trustworthy than leaders who simply make unmitigated requests?

RQ2: Do indirect and direct requests differ in building trust?

Previous literature has provided mixed results when examining differences between directness and indirectness. For example, Camiciottoli provides evidence for using indirectness to maintain likability [10]. On the other hand, studies have also shown several contexts in which directness is actually preferred [11]–[13]. The current study seeks to examine these differences on perceptions of trust.

RQ3: Is there an optimal combination of level of directness and type of linguistic politeness strategy in building trust?

The final research question addresses the notion that language rarely occurs in a vacuum. That is, all requests contain a syntactic form (direct or indirect), along with optional politeness strategies. The current study seeks to discover whether, if at all, one combination is more effective in trust building than another.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a detailed discussion of previous studies that relate both directly and indirectly to the current research questions in order to point out natural gaps where the current study resides. This section includes theoretical frameworks, selection of the literature for review, Linguistic Politeness Theory, politeness in leader-member relationships, politeness in email communication, communication and trust, and hypotheses.

Theoretical Frameworks The current study relies on two major streams of research. The first is Linguistic Politeness Theory, particularly in its contemporary treatment. One prevalent treatment is that of Campbell and her colleagues, which provides a basis for examining linguistic politeness in leader-member relationships [14]–[16]. In that work, Campbell et al. apply Linguistic Politeness Theory to leader-member interactions. Adopted from the competing values framework, Campbell describes how a leader's use of linguistic politeness is appropriate in many contexts of relationship building, particularly when relationship building outweighs expediency.

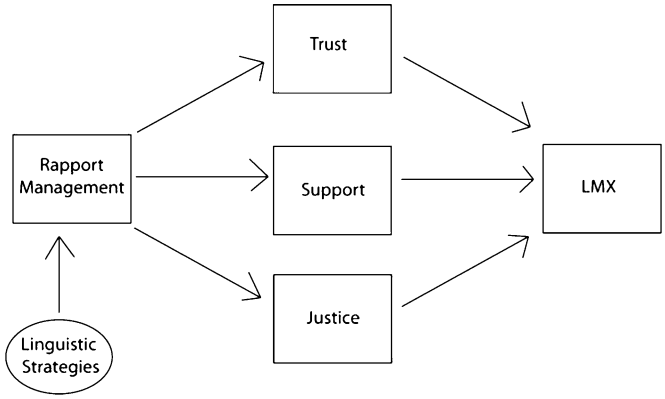

Fig. 1. Linguistic politeness model adopted from White (2007).

Research in organizational psychology, namely leader-member exchange theory (LMX), also provides a vital theoretical component to the current study. LMX focuses on the two-way relationship between leader and subordinate, and according to this theory, leaders and subordinates are categorized as "in-group" or "out-group" depending on the strength of their working relationship. "In-group" relationships are preferred and are categorized by mutual respect, liking, and trust [17]. Of particular importance to the current study is a framework developed by White, which established a link between rapport management and LMX, mediated by trust [7]. White developed a survey instrument to quantitatively measure rapport management, a construct that is based on Linguistic Politeness Theory. White's model provides a strong theoretical basis for the current study and its research questions. However, the current study adds a linguistic perspective to the model. See Fig. 1 for an adopted theoretical framework based on White's original work. In this model, the addition of linguistic politeness strategies provides a clear framework for the existing study and its subsequent research questions.

Selection of Literature for the Review Specific topics within each of the theoretical frameworks were selected in order to review the most prevalent and current research. First, in the field of linguistics, several discourse analytic studies were

chosen in order to establish evidence regarding the way leaders utilize linguistic politeness in their interactions with subordinates. Specific search terms that were chosen include "linguistic politeness," "leader," and "power." Second, studies examining politeness in email communication were also chosen. Although many studies in this area are not directly related to the current study, a handful addressed linguistic politeness in business or professional emails. Specific search terms that were used include "email," "politeness," "workplace," "business communication," and "professional communication." Finally, research on communication and trust was selected, which primarily was found in organizational psychology research. One specific stream of organizational psychology research focuses on communication as a predictor of trust. Search terms included "leadership communication," "leader," "perceived trust," and "trustworthiness."

Linguistic Politeness Theory The seminal theory in politeness was developed by Brown and Levinson and is based on the Goffman's concept of "face," or public self-image [18], [19]. Face is something that "is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" [8, p. 61]. One way that face can be threatened, according to Brown and Levinson, is through what is known as a face-threatening act (FTA). FTAs cause addressee's to lose face by either imposing on an addressee's autonomy or imposing on an addressee's desire to be included, appreciated or liked. In workplace situations, leaders inherently have to issue FTAs in the form of directives and requests. That is, part of a leader's job is to get subordinates to do things, which will inherently impose on their autonomy and sometimes their desire to be included [16]. Brown and Levinson suggest that face is constantly attended to within interactions, and speakers or senders of messages can make linguistic choices to mitigate the force of an FTA. These linguistic choices, or linguistic politeness strategies, have been categorized using several different taxonomies. The current study borrows from Blum-Kulka's taxonomy, which is based on Brown and Levinson's original taxonomy [20]. The rationale for choosing Blum-Kulka's taxonomy is its relatively encompassing nature. That is, the taxonomy is able to organize a wide range of linguistic politeness strategies into a few mutually exclusive and distinct categories. Furthermore, recent research has continued to use Blum-Kulka's taxonomy. For example, Mackiewicz and Riley prescribed linguistic strategies to editors, which included using downgraders and supportive moves [6]. These categories, which include a variety of optional linguistic moves, will be discussed in the following subsections.

Optional Moves: Optional moves are linguistic choices a speaker or sender of a message can make that either mitigate (make more polite) or intensify (make less polite) the force of a speech act. In the current study, three major optional moves were investigated, including (1) downgraders, (2) supportive moves, and (3) aggravating moves. Downgraders mitigate the force of a speech act, as well as attach directly to the speech act. Supportive moves also mitigate the force of a speech act, but are independent of the speech act. The underlined items in example 1 and 2 show downgraders and supportive moves respectively.

> **Ex. 1**—Could you possibly send me the file as soon as you can, please?
> **Ex. 2**—I know you are really busy, but could you send me the file as soon as you can?

Example 1 has two downgraders, *possibly* and *please*. As shown in example 1, *possibly* and *please* are attached to the actual speech act itself. In example 2, a supportive move is used in the underlined portion of the message, *I know you are really busy*. Example 2 differs from example 1 in that the underlined strategy in example 2 is independent of the speech act. That is, *I know you are really busy* adds a statement of empathy that is not present in example 1. The key, however, is that supportive moves and downgraders function in the same way; senders of messages use each to soften the force of a message.

Finally, aggravating moves are an optional move that intensifies the force of a speech act, instead of mitigating the force. Aggravating moves were included in this study as a baseline for comparison because aggravating moves essentially function in an opposite manner from mitigating strategies. The underlined portion of Example 3 is an aggravating move.

> **Ex. 3**—Unless you want to be reprimanded, send me the file as soon as you can.

Level of Directness: In addition to optional moves, messages can be made more or less polite through varying levels of directness. In the current study, two levels of directness were tested: direct and indirect. Direct speech acts, quite simply, are clear,

unambiguous messages. Linguistically, however, directness is defined when the syntactic form of the speech act matches the illocutionary force, or underlying intention, of the speech act. The illocutionary force of all directives is to order or tell someone that they must perform some action. Direct directives are syntactically presented as imperative structures. If the illocutionary force, in this case a directive, matches the syntactic form, in this case an imperative structure, then a direct speech act is presented. An example of a direct directive can be seen in example 4.

Ex. 4—Send me the file as soon as you can.

However, if the syntactic form does not match the illocutionary force, the speech act is considered indirect. Indirect speech acts are often less clear and more ambiguous than direct speech acts. However, indirect speech acts are often considered more polite than direct speech acts [8]. For example, an indirect directive might be presented with an interrogative syntactic form (question), as seen in example 5.

Ex. 5—Could you send me the file as soon as you can?

Politeness in Leader-Member Relationships Linguistic politeness has been studied in professional contexts, specifically examining the role of power in relationships. For example, several studies indicated that people in positions of power do indeed consider subordinates' face in interactions and use linguistic politeness strategies to tend their subordinates' face needs [1]–[4]. Chan looked more specifically at a director's use of politeness strategies in business meetings. The results of that analysis showed that the director used a variety of politeness strategies in three different professional relationships [21]. The study supported the notion that people in positions of power are cognizant of the need to mitigate FTAs by using politeness strategies. Similarly, Harris looked at applying politeness theory to three power-laden relationships: judge and defendant, doctor and patient, and police officer and citizen. She found that even in those relationships with high amounts of power distance, the person in the position of power still used politeness strategies to mitigate FTAs [22]. Other studies have also indicated that managers use indirectness and other mitigated discursive strategies when issuing directives to subordinates [23], [24]. Finally, Holmes reports on a manager's use of small talk as a politeness strategy, used before issuing a directive [25]. The previous studies examined politeness from a descriptive lens, primarily using a discourse analytic methodology. These studies clearly show the manner in which people in positions of power use politeness to maintain face with subordinates. However, the methodological approach used in the previous studies is qualitative, providing a natural gap in the literature for the quantitative nature of the current study.

Some politeness studies have addressed potential outcomes of politeness by prescribing advice about politeness usage. Mackiewicz and Riley, for instance, provided advice to editors to use a variety of linguistic strategies in order to mitigate forceful directives in editing comments to authors [6]. Their treatment, however, looked at politeness from the perspective of the issuer, and not from addressees, whom actually receive these strategies. It can be difficult to truly understand the impact of politeness usage without such a perspective. Similarly, Campbell provided leaders with prescriptive steps for improving leadership communication, advising leaders to choose a delivery method for their requests by weighing the importance of the request against the importance of maintaining or building relationships. Potential outcomes of politeness usage were also hypothesized, including improved working relationships [14]. Again, however, the addressee's perspective was not taken into account in this work. Therefore, another natural gap in the literature exists that the current study can occupy.

Politeness in Email Communication Politeness in email communication, specifically in professional contexts, has been studied to an extent. For example, Huang conducted an empirical study that examined the relationship between email communication and supervisor-subordinate exchange quality. Results indicated that quantity of email communication was associated with an increased exchange quality between supervisors and subordinates [26]. Research has also specifically focused on email communication and linguistic politeness. Recently, Vinagre investigated politeness strategies used among students in collaborative relationships, analyzing emails from a small group of students. Vinagre found that this particular set of emails contained more positive politeness strategies than negative politeness strategies. Positive strategies are used to create solidarity, while negative strategies are used to maintain or respect the autonomy of an email receiver [27]. Similarly, Rogers and Lee-Wong examined politeness in email communication sent from subordinates to superiors [28].

Duthler examined differences in politeness usage between voice-mail and email messages. The results indicated that email messages included significantly more markers of linguistic politeness than voice-mail messages, due possibly to the very nature of email [29]. That is, email allows users to edit a message before sending it, an act that is not available in spoken discourse. Finally, Kong also investigated the use of politeness in email messages between leaders and members. Interestingly, leaders used more politeness strategies when emailing subordinates than in peer-to-peer emails [30]. These studies indicate that leaders or superiors indeed use politeness in email exchanges with subordinates, similar to the findings that examined spoken discourse. Furthermore, there may be some expectation from subordinates for leaders to be overly polite in emails, as indicated in Duthler and Kong [29], [30].

Communication and Trust In organizational psychology, trust is a variable that has received a lot of attention. The current study defines trust as the "willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the expectation of favorable outcomes for the trusting party" [31]–[33]. Trust has been linked to important organizational outcomes like job satisfaction [34]–[36] and cooperation [37]. More recently, trust has been linked to variables like knowledge sharing [38]–[42]. One major predictor of trust, according to previous research, is communication. Thomas, Zolin, and Hartman examined quality and quantity of communication as a predictor of trust. They found that:

> when employees perceive that they are getting information from their supervisors and coworkers that is timely, accurate, and relevant, they are more likely to feel less vulnerable and more able to rely on their coworkers and supervisors. [43, p. 303]

Although Thomas et al. sought to answer a similar set of research questions as the current study, the components of communication that they were interested in are quite different than the current study. In other words, Thomas et al. were interested in quality and quantity of communication, as opposed to specific linguistic aspects of communication. Finally, White conducted a study that is even more similar to the current study. He found that a leader's use of politeness, as measured by a rapport-management survey, was highly correlated with increased levels of trust between a leader and member [7]. However, the method in which White measured politeness involved a survey instrument instead of investigating actual language usage. Although survey instruments are powerful tools to gain insight on behavior, it can be difficult to gauge politeness, and ultimately provide prescriptive advice about politeness usage, without an examination of language usage.

Hypotheses As presented in the previous literature, linguistic politeness has been used to manage relationships in a variety of contexts, including the workplace. In addition, various aspects of communication, including communication quantity and style, have been strongly associated with trust. Therefore, based on the literature, several hypotheses regarding the impact of linguistic politeness on trust are presented.

> **H1**. Email messages that include supportive moves and downgraders will produce significantly higher levels of trust than messages with aggravating moves.

As stated previously, both downgraders and supportive moves mitigate the force of a speech act, theoretically making the overall message more polite. Aggravating moves, on the other hand, intensify the force of a speech act, theoretically making the overall message less polite. According to previous politeness literature, supportive moves and downgraders will inherently be perceived as more polite than aggravating moves [8], [9]. Extending this assumption, a leader who uses politeness strategies (supportive moves and downgraders) in their email communication will build perceptions of trust more effectively than a leader who doesn't use politeness strategies (aggravating moves).

> **H2**. Email messages that include indirect speech acts will produce significantly higher levels of trust than messages with direct speech acts.

Research investigating directness has historically produced mixed results. For example, the seminal work of Brown and Levinson placed value on indirectness, equating the use of indirectness with politeness [8]. Several studies have indicated that people in positions of power use politeness strategies, including indirectness, when making requests to subordinates [1]–[4]. Furthermore, research has shown that indirectness is often used to manage relationships and maintain likability [10]. Therefore, indirectness is often viewed as a linguistic tool in relationship building.

However, research has also deviated from conventional wisdom that places value on indirectness. Eaton et al. found that authors preferred editors that used a direct speech act, and not indirect speech acts, followed by what they called a "payoff" statement [11]. Similarly, Blum-Kulka investigated the role of indirectness in perceptions of politeness. In this study, the author found that a balance of clarity and coerciveness avoidance was perceived as most polite [12]. That is, non-conventional indirect strategies, also known as hints, were actually perceived as impolite. Finally, Friess found that technical communicators, when collaborating and attempting to meet deadlines, issued direct speech acts due possibly to the group's "goal for efficiency" [13, p. 18].

Although some research has indicated that people have a preference for directness, these studies have typically involved contexts where expediency is of utmost importance. Conversely, studies that have shown a preference for indirectness involved contexts where relationship building was important. Since trust is considered a relational variable, I hypothesize that indirectness will be more effective in building trust than directness.

H3. The effectiveness of supportive moves and downgraders in building trust will rely on level of directness.

Previous research examining linguistic politeness has yet to empirically examine the effectiveness of supportive moves or downgraders when paired with either an indirect or direct speech act. That is, specific combinations of level of directness and optional moves have not been studied. However, due to the contextual nature of linguistic politeness, it is hypothesized that optional moves may be more effective at building trust, depending on whether they are paired with a direct or indirect speech act.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this section is to provide an in-depth discussion and justification of the current study's methods so that researchers can replicate and improve upon the current design. This section includes a description of the study's choice of research methodology, participants, research design, email instrument, survey instrument, experimental procedure, and statistical analysis.

Choice of Research Methodology An experimental methodology was chosen over other research methods for several reasons. Admittedly, other possible research methods for this type of study exist. They include qualitative methods such as discourse analysis, and quantitative methods like survey research. Although a discourse analytic approach would produce meaningful qualitative data, this approach cannot establish causality. Due to the nature of the research questions driving the current study, only an experimental approach can produce causality. Similarly, survey research would produce associations, or correlations, which don't allow for directionality in its conclusions. Therefore, experimental design was chosen for the current study. Like any research method, experiments have drawbacks. Since experiments require the researcher to control for variables, language may appear contrived or unrealistic. However, it's essential to weigh the positive aspects of a research design against the negative aspects. In this particular case, the ability to control variables, test hypotheses, and establish causality outweighed the need for a more natural approach.

Participants Approval from the Institutional Review Board at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) has been obtained for this study. Furthermore, written consent from each study participant was obtained. Participants in the current study were drawn from a population of students at a mid-sized, private, Midwestern university. One-hundred fifteen students currently or previously enrolled in IIT's Interprofessional Projects Program (IPRO) participated in the study. IPROs are courses that involve advanced undergraduate students from various disciplines and they are placed on a team to solve a pertinent problem or issue, often for an actual external client. Students who have taken an IPRO course were chosen for two major reasons: (1) They were familiar with team-based projects with an appointed team leader, which is the basic structure of an IPRO, and (2) students in IPROs often use email as their primary form of communication. Furthermore, the IPRO program is intended to simulate a workplace environment. Although the IPRO courses may not be the most accurate simulation of the workplace, they can serve as a bridge to the workplace by providing insight on the way student teams function and respond to specific types of communication. Therefore, the population that this study draws upon is not intended to directly reflect a population of working professionals, but rather to reflect a population of advanced undergraduate students who have worked on a team to solve a problem.

Participants were solicited via class visitations and emails and were offered $10 in exchange for their participation. In addition to individual meetings

TABLE I
2 × 3 FACTORIAL DESIGN

		Optional Moves		
		Supportive Moves	Downgraders	Aggravating Moves
Level of Directness	Indirect	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
	Direct	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6

with participants, open sessions were conducted where students were encouraged to walk in and participate. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental groups.

Research Design Six experimental groups were created based on level of directness and type of optional move. See Table I for the experimental design.

Each group is described in detail below:

(1) *Indirect/supportive (Group 1)*: This group received a linguistic formula that contained an indirect speech act, three supportive moves, and one downgrader. One downgrader was included in the supportive group in order to maintain realistic-sounding emails.
(2) *Indirect/downgrading (Group 2)*: This group received a linguistic formula that contained an indirect speech act, three downgraders, and one supportive move. One supportive move was included in the downgrading group in order to maintain realistic-sounding emails.
(3) *Indirect/aggravating (Group 3)*: This group received a linguistic formula that will contain an indirect speech act and one or more aggravating moves.
(4) *Direct/supportive (Group 4)*: This group received a linguistic formula that contained a direct speech act, three supportive moves, and one downgrader.
(5) *Direct/downgrading (Group 5)*: This group received a linguistic formula that contained a direct speech act, three downgraders, and one supportive move.
(6) *Direct/aggravating (Group 6)*: This group received a linguistic formula that contained a direct speech act and one or more aggravating moves.

Email Instrument (Independent Variables) The independent variables, level of directness and optional moves, were presented to study participants in a packet of twenty emails that were written from the perspective of a hypothetical leader. A separate set of emails was created for each of the six experimental groups. Also, the set of twenty emails simulated the life of a one-semester project. Every email contained both of the independent variables and formed a coherent email message. Eighteen of the emails in each set of twenty contained a directive or request. Although the group of twenty emails was centered on a similar idea or theme, each of the twenty emails was an independent entity. That is, the interpretation of one email did not rely on a previous or future email. The rationale for choosing directives is the face-threatening nature of directives. The remaining two emails were distracter emails and contained a speech act that was not a directive. All six experimental groups received identical distracter emails. The reason for the inclusion of distracter emails is that a series of twenty emails containing only directive speech acts may be perceived as unrealistic to the participant. Furthermore, the inclusion of the two distracter emails was based partially from a consultation with two linguists and an expert in experimental design.

Due to the nature of the study design, several limitations in the creation of the emails exist. A brief discussion of these limitations will be discussed in this section. However, a more detailed account can be found in the discussion, limitations, and suggestions for future research section. First, it is difficult to simulate actual email interaction because the participant doesn't have a chance to respond to the emails. Furthermore, in a real-life setting, the leader would likely be able to alter his or her email requests based on the responses of the receiver. Therefore, the emails in the current study may appear a bit contrived or unrealistic. The purpose of the study, however, isn't to provide leaders with templates for email communication, since email communication is simply too complex for such prescriptive advice. Rather, the purpose of the study is to provide leaders with some general ideas about politeness patterns, which may help them rethink their communicative style. Therefore, the inclusion of less than realistic sets of emails can be justified, based on the purposes and design of the study. Although these limitations exist, they are somewhat unavoidable in a true experimental design. In future work, a quasi-experimental design that makes the emails more realistic and interactive may address these issues.

Survey Instrument (Dependent Variable) Perceived trust was measured through a nine item survey adopted from Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman [31]. This instrument measures the level of trust an

employee feels toward a supervisor. The response format is a Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Cronbach's alpha for this measure is 0.81. A sample item of this measure is "I would be willing to let my supervisor have complete control over my future in this company."

Experimental Procedure The participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental groups that were stratified by gender. Demographic information, including gender, age, major, ethnicity, and year in school, was collected before the experiment began. Demographic questionnaires were collected and the study packet, including persona profiles and emails, was distributed.

Each participant read two persona profiles: (1) the character they will embody for the study and (2) the persona profile of their leader, the person who sent them the emails they will read. The profiles remained consistent regardless of the group the participant was placed in. Participants then read a series of twenty emails that exhibited varying linguistic formulas, as described previously in the methodology. Each email was presented on a separate sheet of paper, and all twenty emails were sent from the leader persona. The emails simulated four months' worth of communication, taking the participant through the life of a hypothetical IPRO project. The emails appeared like a real email and included information about the sender, the recipients, the date and time the email was sent, the subject line, and the email message itself.

After the participants finished reading the emails, participants were asked to raise their hands, and the study packets were collected. The packets were collected so that participants could not go back and re-read emails, which may cause their initial impression of the emails, along with their impression of the writer of the emails, to change. After study packets were collected, posttest questionnaires were distributed that included the survey instrument that measured trust. The entire procedure did not take longer than 40 minutes.

Data Analysis A 2×3 factorial design was used in this study. A two-way ANOVA was run to determine significant differences between groups. Based on the research design, the most logical analysis of the data was the two-way ANOVA. The reason why researchers choose this particular statistical test is the versatility and comprehensiveness of the test. A researcher can compare all experimental groups in several different ways. Results from a two-way ANOVA may show researchers patterns in the data that they might not have been looking for.

Tests for the main effects between optional moves were conducted to determine significant differences on trust between groups containing supportive, downgrading, and aggravating moves. Tests for main effects between levels of directness were also conducted to determine significant differences on trust between groups containing indirect and direct speech acts. Further, the Bonferroni follow-up test was conducted to see if a significant main effect was present. This test determines exactly which groups significantly differ from each other.

The two-way ANOVA also measured interactions between independent variables. If a significant interaction exists, the effectiveness of supportive moves depends on whether they were presented with a direct or indirect speech act.

Validity and Generalizability of the Data The data generated in this study rely on the constructs and subsequent instruments used to gather the data. To ensure that the constructs used were valid, language experts were consulted in the creation of the email instrument. Two linguists were asked to read each set of emails in order to ensure that the politeness strategy used in each email actually matched the strategy being tested.

Generalizability is a concern, particularly in experimental design. This happens because results from a specific population, and a subsequent sample from that population, cannot be extrapolated beyond the parameters of that population. However, this does not mean that the results of the current study are invalid for professionals. Results from the current study can be used to guide leaders working in teams. Furthermore, results from this study can be compared to a replicated version of the study that uses a professional population.

RESULTS

The results section will provide a detailed account of the quantitative results and subsequent analysis of data. This section starts with a description of who participated in the study and is followed by hypothesis testing results.

Who Participated in the Study One-hundred fifteen students currently or previously enrolled in IIT's IPRO program participated in the study. There were 72 male and 43 female participants. Furthermore, there were 52 Caucasian participants

and 63 minority participants. The median age of participants was 21.

Hypothesis Testing Results In order to test hypothesis 1, a two-way ANOVA was conducted, which makes two major statistical comparisons. The first statistical comparison is a main effects test, which essentially allows a researcher to (1) compare the mean scores across rows, which in this study is level of directness, and (2) columns, which compare optional moves (See Table I). A column comparison was conducted because hypothesis 1 focuses on optional moves. Since this research design has three columns, or three different optional moves, three separate tests were completed. First, the mean scores for trust in groups that contained supportive moves (groups 1 and 4) were compared to mean scores for trust in groups that contained downgraders (groups 2 and 5). Second, the mean scores for trust in groups that contained supportive moves were compared to the mean scores for trust in groups that contained aggravating moves (groups 3 and 6). Finally, the mean scores for trust in groups that contained downgraders were compared to the mean scores for trust in groups that contained aggravating moves.

The two-way ANOVA analysis indicated that there was a significant main effect for optional moves $F(2,109) = 8.74$, $p < 0.01$. A follow-up analysis showed that supportive moves ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.61$) and downgraders ($M = 2.79$; $SD = 0.57$) both produced significantly higher levels of trust than aggravating moves ($M = 2.36$; $SD = 0.46$). See Table II for the full two-way ANOVA table. Hypothesis 1 is as follows:

> **H1**. Email messages that include supportive moves and downgraders will produce significantly higher levels of trust than messages with aggravating moves.

Based on the results of the analysis, hypothesis 1 was confirmed.

Hypothesis 2 was tested using the same main effects test that was completed for hypothesis 1. However, because hypothesis 2 focused on level of directness, a comparison of rows was conducted. Groups that contained indirect messages (groups 1,2, and 3) were compared to groups that contained direct messages (groups 4, 5, and 6).

The two-way ANOVA analysis indicated a non-significant main effect for level of directness $F(1,109) = 0.186$, $p = 0.667$. The means for indirect speech acts ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.58$) and direct speech acts ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.60$) were not significantly different. See Table II for the full two-way ANOVA table. Hypothesis 2 is as follows:

TABLE II
TWO-WAY ANOVA TABLE FOR TRUST

Source	Type III sums of squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	f	p
Optional Moves	5.07	2	2.53	8.74	0.00
Level of Directness	0.05	1	0.05	0.19	0.67
Optional Move * Level of Directness	2.39	2	1.19	4.12	0.02
Error	31.60	109	0.29		
Total	852.17	115			

> **H2**. Email messages that include indirect speech acts will produce significantly higher levels of trust than messages with direct speech acts.

Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 was tested by conducting the second portion of the two-way ANOVA, the test for an interaction effect. A test for interaction effects is conducted when an experimental design has more than one independent variable, in order to test whether an interaction exists between the two independent variables. Essentially, an interaction exists when the effectiveness of one independent variable relies on the level of another independent variable. For example, an interaction would test whether supportive moves that are presented with indirect speech acts (group 1) produce a significantly different mean than supportive moves presented with a direct speech act (group 4). More simply put, an interaction in our case means that one linguistic politeness strategy may be effective only with direct speech acts, while another may be effective only with indirect speech acts.

According to the two-way ANOVA, there was a significant interaction between optional moves and level of directness $F(2,109) = 4.12$, $p = 0.019$. See Fig. 2 for a graphical representation of the interaction. Since there was a significant interaction, the standard protocol is to further analyze the main effect for optional moves. Statistically, we examine the differences among optional moves for directness and indirectness separately. For example, we look at differences between supportive moves and downgraders at

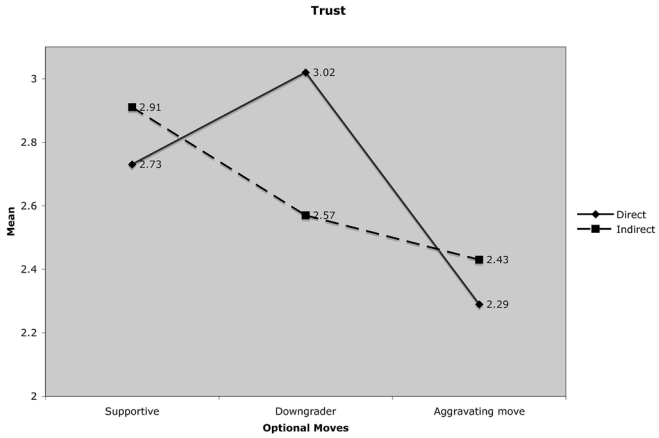

Fig. 2. Interaction between optional move and directness for trust.

the direct and indirect levels. To control for Type I error, the alpha level was set at 0.025. There were significant differences between optional moves for directness, $F(2,109) = 8.73$, $p = 0.000$. There were also significant differences between optional moves for indirectness, $F(2,109) = 4.20$, $p = 0.018$. This simply tells us that a significant difference exists between optional moves, based on level of directness. Follow-up statistical analyses were conducted to discover the nature of these significant differences.

Follow-up tests evaluated three pairwise differences among the means for both directness and indirectness, with the alpha set at 0.008 to control for Type I error over the three pairwise comparisons. Essentially, we are statistically comparing each of the six cells, as seen in Table I. Downgraders were significantly more effective at building trust than aggravating moves when presented with direct speech acts, $F(1,109) = 10.6$, $p = 0.000$. However, there were no significant differences between downgraders and supportive moves or between supportive moves and aggravating moves when presented with direct speech acts. Another pairwise comparison was run for differences between optional moves for indirectness. Supportive moves were significantly more effective at building trust than aggravating moves when presented with indirect speech acts, $F(1,109) = 7.88$, $p = 0.006$. Finally, there were not significant differences between downgraders and supportive moves or between downgraders and aggravating moves for indirectness.

The simple main effects on level of directness were also examined on each type of optional move. To control for Type I error, the alpha was set at 0.016(0.05/3 = 0.016). There was a significant difference between directness and indirectness for downgraders, $F(1,109) = 6.65$, $p = 0.01$. Since level of directness only has two levels, follow-up tests are not required. In this case, directness when presented with downgraders was significantly more effective in building trust than indirectness presented with downgraders. However, there was not a significant difference between directness and indirectness for supportive moves, $F(1,109) = 1.16$, $p = 0.283$, or aggravating moves, $F(1,109) = 0.59$, $p = 0.44$.

In summary, downgraders paired with direct speech acts were more effective at building trust than downgraders paired with indirect speech acts. Conversely, supportive moves paired with indirect speech acts were more effective at building trust than supportive moves paired with direct speech acts. Finally, all combinations involving supportive moves or downgraders were more effective at building trust than any combination involving an aggravating move. See Table III for linguistic examples of the group differences. Linguistic conditions are presented in order from highest means for trust to lowest means for trust. Hypothesis 3 is as stated:

> **H3**. The effectiveness of supportive moves and downgraders in building trust will rely on level of directness.

Hypothesis 3 was supported.

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this section is to discuss possible implications of the results, acknowledge limitations of the study, and provide suggestions for future research. The section starts with a discussion of the main effect for optional moves and continues on to the main effect for level of directness, interaction effect, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Discussion The discussion subsection will present possible explanations for the results from a sociolinguistic and organizational psychology perspective. Each quantiative result from the two-way ANOVA will be discussed, culminating in a detailed discussion of the interaction effect.

Main Effect for Optional Moves: Results showed that both supportive moves and downgraders produced significantly higher means on trust than aggravating moves. In order to clearly

exemplify this result, I will use some key linguistic examples. The following directives exemplify each of the three optional moves. In each case, the underlined portion is the optional move:

> **Ex. 6—Supportive move**: I understand that you are extremely busy these days, but can you complete the budget report?
> **Ex. 7—Downgrader**: Would it be ok for you to possibly complete the budget report?
> **Ex. 8—Aggravating move**: Unless you want to lose points, can you complete the budget report?

According to the results, examples 6 and 7 were significantly more effective at building trust than example 8. From an examination of these examples, it is not difficult to conclude that this finding alone is not particularly groundbreaking. However, the results are, in fact, in line with previous research. Specifically, examples 6 and 7 utilize strategies that mitigate the force of the speech act, while example 8 utilizes a strategy that intensifies the force of the speech act. Across all theories of linguistic politeness, the basic foundation of each theory is the notion that a speaker's language choices have the power to impact interpersonal relationships [2], [8], [9], [44]. This central tenet has been assumed but not empirically tested with this particular workplace outcome-trust. That is, a specific understanding of the nature in which trust is affected has yet to be fully determined.

Campbell describes strategies for building "in-group" relationships that include presenting speech acts with varying linguistic strategies for mitigating the force of the speech act [15]. Although Campbell's book provides practitioners with tangible insights from Linguistic Politeness Theory, the book relies on the assumption that utilizing linguistic politeness will indeed be an effective tool for workplace relationship building. The statistically significant results of the current study, particularly of hypothesis 1, are important because they not only confirm the assumption set forth in Campbell's application of Linguistic Politeness Theory, but they also look at specific instances in which politeness can affect relationships between leaders and members. The results indicate that student leaders who use *any* kind of linguistic politeness strategy that *mitigates* the force of the speech act will be more effective at building trust than using a strategy that *intensifies* the force of the speech act. Several important implications can be inferred from this finding. Primarily, this is an important insight for leaders because they have to issue a lot of requests as an inherent part of their job. According to Campbell, issuing directives is a "necessary evil" that leaders must do in order to effectively perform their jobs [16]. The results of the current study indicate that it may be worthwhile to spend time to craft an email that contains mitigating strategies, even if it takes conscious effort.

Another important insight comes from examining exactly what function aggravating moves have and, consequently, looking at the results from a perspective of how *not* to issue a directive. Aggravating moves were perceived most negatively, which indicates that emphasizing or strengthening the force of a directive speech act has a negative impact on trust. Aggravating moves are presented in three distinct ways, according to Blum-Kulka: (1) an insult (e.g., *You are continually late with your reports...*) (2) a threat (e.g., *Unless you want to work over time...*), or (3) a moralizing statement (e.g., *If you are really a part of this team...*) [20]. It may seem quite obvious that presenting insults, threats, or moralizing statements is going to have a negative impact on relationships between leaders and members; however, it does not negate the fact that some leaders might use these kinds of strategies with their subordinates in order to increase productivity, or to motivate the employee to adhere to the directive. This can be especially true for leaders who manage employees from an authoritarian perspective. However, the results of the current study indicate that it may be in a leader's best interest to avoid excessive use of aggravating moves in some situations because they may have a negative consequence on trust, particularly over time. Future studies might include an analysis of aggravating moves coupled with politeness strategies, in order to see whether aggravating moves are still perceived so negatively in that context.

Main Effect for Level of Directness: The results indicated that there was not a significant difference between direct and indirect speech acts for trust. This is interesting because many treatments of politeness theory have indicated that indirect speech acts are perceived as more polite and are often used to build or maintain relationships [6], [9]. However, perceptions of indirectness are likely to be altered by surrounding context. Therefore, another explanation for the lack of significant differences between direct and indirect speech acts is the fact that a significant interaction effect existed for trust. This contextual element of directness will be discussed in the following subsection.

TABLE III
EXAMPLES OF EACH CONDITION ORDERED FROM HIGHEST TO LOWEST

Rank	Condition	Example
1	Direct Downgrading	Please finish the project plan if possible.
2	Indirect Supportive	I know that you are really busy this week, but could you finish the project plan?
3	Direct Supportive	I know that you are really busy this week, but finish the project plan.
4	Indirect Downgrading	Could you possibly finish the project plan, please?
5	Indirect Aggravating	Unless we all want to fail, can you finish the project plan?
6	Direct Aggravating	Unless we all want to fail, finish the project plan.

TABLE IV
EFFECTIVE AND INEFFECTIVE EXAMPLES IN BUILDING TRUST

Effective in Building Trust	Example	Ineffective in Building Trust	Example
Downgrading/ Direct	Please write up a draft of the project and send it to me as soon as you possibly can.	Downgrading/ Indirect	Can you please write up a draft of the project and send it to me as soon as you possibly can?
Supportive/ Indirect	The IPRO program requires all teams to submit a set of deliverables including a project plan. I know that you are really busy this week, but can you write up a draft of the project plan and send it to me?	Supportive/ Direct	The IPRO program requires all teams to submit a set of deliverables including a project plan. I know that you are really busy this week, but write up a draft of the project plan and send it to me.

Interaction Effect: There was a significant interaction between the independent variables for trust. The nature of the interaction is one in which downgraders presented with a syntactically direct speech act were more effective at building trust than downgraders presented with a syntactically indirect speech act. Interestingly, supportive moves seemed to be perceived just the opposite. That is, supportive moves combined with indirect speech acts were more effective at building trust than supportive moves combined with direct speech acts. See Table IV for linguistic examples of this phenomenon. For the sake of convenience, this phenomenon will be referred to as the supportive/indirect and downgrading/direct; these two combinations were more effective than their counterparts.

Previous literature may lead to one possible explanation for the supportive/indirect and downgrading/direct phenomenon. Specifically, Campbell discusses the use of direct utterances, which she calls on-record plainly [15]. These utterances are also known as bald on record, according to Brown and Levinson's treatment of politeness theory [8], [9]. An on-record utterance is a syntactically direct utterance, and according to Campbell, should "leave no doubt as to your message when interacting with a member" [15, p. 60]. What Campbell is describing is a message that is completely unambiguous and cannot be misinterpreted by the receiver of the message. She goes on to suggest some guidelines when presenting an on-record utterance, one of which includes being brief. She says, "using this tactic means being only as informative as needed to get the point of your message across" [15, p. 63]. This piece of advice, although it is not explicitly stated, invokes Grice's maxim of manner [18]. Grice's maxim of manner states that a rational speaker ought to be as clear, brief, orderly, and unambiguous as possible. Further, Grice claims that if a speaker violates this maxim, by being ambiguous, for example, an implicature is raised. That is, the receiver of the utterance must infer something about the meaning of the utterance that is not explicitly stated in the utterance. Campbell's brevity principle, along with Grice's maxim of manner, might provide some

insight from a sociolinguistic perspective about the interaction between level of directness and optional moves.

Downgraders, by their nature, are an optional linguistic strategy that attach directly to a speech act. Further, downgraders produce very little additional content to the speech act. Example 12 shows downgraders, which are underlined.

> **Ex. 12**—Would you possibly complete the report by Friday please?

As seen in example 12, downgraders can mitigate the force of the speech act without actually adding any additional content to the request itself. On the other hand, supportive moves are optional linguistic strategies that occur separate from the speech act itself. More specifically, supportive moves will often present additional semantic content, in addition to the speech act itself. Example 13 shows an example of the supportive move with the supportive move underlined.

> **Ex. 13**—I understand that it is a busy time in the semester, but can you complete the report by Friday?

In contrast to example 12, example 13 adds an additional piece of content that is completely separate from the speech act. Therefore, according to Campbell's brevity principle, downgraders not only mitigate the directive, they also might actually produce a more efficient and brief directive. Supportive moves, on the other hand, add to the length and content of the email request and, subsequently, may be perceived negatively. To take this a step further, we can analyze the interaction by looking at it through the perspective of Grice's maxim of manner. Direct speech acts with downgraders seem to produce an appropriate amount of content, balancing politeness with a clear and unambiguous message. However, supportive moves provide the receiver of the message with a lengthy (longer than downgraders) and possibly ambiguous message. In this case, the receiver of the message may draw an inference about the speech act that may cause him or her to distrust the sender of the message. For example, an email that presents a direct speech act with supportive moves might look like the following example:

> **Ex. 14—Supportive/Direct**: The IPRO program requires all teams to submit a set of deliverables including a project plan. I know that you are really busy this week, but write up a draft of the project plan and send it to me.

In the previous example, the sender of the message is not "only as informative as needed" and includes supportive moves that discuss a rationale for the request (*The IPRO program requires all teams to submit*. . .) and empathizes with reader (*I know that you are really busy this week*. . .). However, what follows the two supportive moves is a speech act that is syntactically direct. The receiver of the message may perceive a mixed or inconsistent message from the sender of the message. That is, the leader is rationalizing the request and empathizing with the receiver, but what immediately follows is an unmitigated direct speech act. This inconsistency may be perceived negatively by the receiver, and over a period time, might cause the receiver to distrust the sender. Compare this to combinations of strategies that were effective at building trust:

> **Ex. 15—Supportive/Indirect**: The IPRO program requires all teams to submit a set of deliverables including a project plan. I know that you are really busy this week, but can you write up a draft of the project plan and send it to me?
> **Ex. 16—Downgrading/Direct**: Please write up a draft of the project and send it to me.

Examples 15 and 16 were both significantly more effective at building trust than the example 14. Both the supportive/indirect and downgrading/direct seem to present a more consistent message than the supportive/direct and the downgrading/indirect. In example 15, the receiver of the message is provided with two supportive moves, statements of rationale and empathy, followed by an indirect speech act. This differs from example 14 only in the syntax of the speech act. The indirect speech act seems to be delivered more consistently when presented with supportive moves. The receiver of the message may read the statement of rationale and empathy and *expect* an indirect speech act, based on the presence of those moves. On the other hand, example 16 simply provides a direct speech act that is mitigated with downgraders like *please*. In this case, there is no additional semantic content. Participants perceived leaders that used language like example 16 as more trustworthy than leaders who used language like example 14, even though both contain direct speech acts. In example 16, however, there are no supportive moves that set the reader up with an *expectation* of a more polite delivery of the speech act.

Previous literature from organizational psychology might further supplement the sociolinguistic explanation. White adapts a definition for trust as a "willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the expectation of favorable outcomes for the trusting party" [7, p. 24]. Furthermore, Whitener et al. outline five factors that influence employees' perceptions of managerial trustworthiness: (1) behavioral consistency, (2) behavioral integrity (consistency between words and deeds), (3) sharing and delegation of control, (4) communication, and (5) demonstration of concern [45]. White points out that "a leader's consistent use of rapport management techniques may be indicative of reliability" and will have the power to affect perceptions of trust between a leader and member [7, p. 37]. Several factors that influence trust may lead to a possible explanation for the phenomenon reported in the current study. First, behavioral consistency includes leaders acting reliable and predictable [45]. This notion of predictability may be applicable to predictability not only in a leader's overall behavior, but also in a leader's communicative behavior. This might be a possible explanation for why supportive moves paired with a direct speech may be perceived as untrustworthy. Supportive moves create a context of politeness for the addressee because they soften the force of the speech act before the actual speech act itself is presented. However, when an unmitigated direct speech act is presented immediately following a supportive move, that context of politeness is no longer a predictable pattern in the leader's communicative behavior. That is, the leader has now exhibited inconsistent behavior by combining supportive moves with direct speech acts. On the other hand, when a leader sends a more consistent message by presenting a direct speech act and mitigating it with downgraders, instead of supportive moves, a more predictable and consistent message may be perceived by the addressee.

In summary, the results of this study yielded several findings about the use of linguistic politeness and its impact trust. First, it confirmed one of the central tenets of Linguistic Politeness Theory, that linguistic politeness has the ability to impact interpersonal relationships. The study confirmed that when a student leader chooses to mitigate directives with politeness strategies, the leader is perceived as more trustworthy than one who chooses not to mitigate directives. Second, the study yielded an interesting finding about context and linguistic politeness strategies. That is, the results indicated that direct and indirect speech acts can be effective at building trust, depending on the contextual discourse that surrounds the speech act. More specifically, direct speech acts were more effective when presented with downgraders, while indirect speech acts were more effective when presented with supportive moves. Historically, indirectness has been valued as a mitigating strategy and is considered more polite than directness. However, this study found that varying levels of directness were equally effective at building relationships if presented in a consistent context.

Limitations Generalizability is a common limitation for experimental studies. The current study drew from a sample of university students. Although the participants were required to be enrolled in team-based courses, there are still many pertinent differences between a population of students and working professionals. Therefore, based on the population from which the sample was drawn, results should be carefully interpreted and limited to student teams. Furthermore, relationships between students, even if they are working as a team in a project-based course, may differ from relationships between co-workers. The current study, however, provides a baseline to which future datasets can be compared.

As discussed previously, though not in detail, the construction of emails was another limitation of the study. The very nature of constructing emails can create unrealistic sounding emails. In an effort to mitigate the unrealistic nature of these emails, the aggravating groups, though still mutually exclusive with other linguistic strategies, may not have been perfectly constructed. Although every email in the aggravating groups contained aggravating moves, some emails contained one, while others contained two. This inconsistency doesn't change the validity of results regarding the aggravating groups, but future studies might use a more balanced approach when constructing emails. For example, including a "mixed" experimental group, where multiple strategies are employed may provide more realistic sounding emails, as well as a new insight into reader's preferences. Another option is to simply eliminate the aggravating group from a future design. Again, however, there is no perfect research design. Therefore, because an experimental design was used in this study, several sacrifices had to be made, and naturally occurring language was one of these sacrifices.

Finally, the application of the research beyond relational outcomes is another limitation of the study. The current study focuses on how language is used to build trust. However, in the workplace, it is also important to address performance outcomes, or outcomes that measure things beyond the relational realm. For example, learning about variables like productivity, profit margin, employee turnover, job satisfaction, or communication may be extremely valuable to many organizations.

Suggestions for Future Research Based on the limitations of the study, there are several logical suggestions for future research. First, it is essential to continue this line of research using different populations. For example, participants drawn from both for-profit organizations and nonprofit organizations will provide a new and important perspective about linguistic politeness and trust in the workplace. Further, replicating this type of study would enable comparisons across populations. It is also important to test the downgrading/direct and supportive/indirect phenomenon with these new populations. Understanding the contextual nature of politeness, particularly with working professionals, is something that would provide practical advice for professionals.

Future research should also continue to improve the instrument used to test linguistic politeness strategies. It is not possible to create a perfectly natural, yet scientific instrument. However, tweaking the emails might enable a more realistic study. For instance, future studies could use a quasi-experimental approach, altering actual emails, while attempting to control for linguistic variables.

A final area for future research includes expanding the current model by testing additional outcome variables such as productivity, profit margin, employee turnover, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction. Previous research has already established trust as a predictor of many of these variables and, therefore, this may be an interesting area of investigation.

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