

## The Role of Negative Politeness in Instruction Manuals

### 1. Introduction

By any definition, an instruction manual that is not clear has failed to achieve its purpose. Ambiguous instructions can lead to time wasted, data loss, property damage—or, more seriously, bodily injury or death. Paul Grice's maxim of manner states that communication "should be expressed in a reasonably clear fashion; that is, it should not be vague, ambiguous, or excessively wordy."<sup>1</sup> In common usage, however, we find many occasions where vagueness is actually desired, when clarity is at odds with politeness. In these situations, we use a variety of politeness strategies to communicate our message without having to state it directly. The issue at stake in this paper is the role these politeness strategies play in technical communication, specifically in instruction manuals.

### 2. Background: Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies fall under the linguistic field of pragmatics. In their book *Linguistics for Non-Linguists*, Frank Parker and Kathryn Riley describe pragmatics as "the study of how language is affected by the context in which it occurs."<sup>2</sup> We frequently adapt our speech to the social dictions of the situation. One way in which we do so is by manipulating the nature of speech acts. Each utterance we make has two aspects: what is said (the locutionary act) and what is done by what is said (the illocutionary act).<sup>3</sup> The illocutionary act that instructions perform is a directive: "an utterance used to try

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Parker and Kathryn Riley, *Linguistics for Non-Linguists: A Primer with Exercises*, 5th ed. (Allyn & Bacon, 2009), 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

to get the hearer [reader] to do something.”<sup>4</sup> The most direct way to perform this act is through an imperative sentence, e.g. “Turn on the computer.” However, as Parker and Riley note, “direct speech acts, particularly directives, can often appear abrupt or even rude.... Thus, speakers are motivated, for reasons of politeness, to mitigate, or soften, such speech acts.”<sup>5</sup>

There are numerous ways that speakers can soften otherwise impolite speech acts. These techniques are based in what Brown and Levinson refer to as “face,” stating that “all competent adult members of a society have (and know each other to have) ‘face’, the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself.”<sup>6</sup> The concept of face has two components: “negative face: the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others” and “positive face: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others.”<sup>7</sup> Speech acts can threaten one’s negative face or one’s positive face, and different strategies are used depending on which aspect of face is being threatened. Directives are by nature a threat to the recipient’s negative face, as they attempt to dictate the recipient’s actions. Brown and Levinson describe negative-politeness strategies as “essentially avoidance-based, and realizations of negative-politeness strategies consist in assurances that the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee’s negative-face wants and will not (or will only minimally) interfere with the addressee’s freedom of action.”<sup>8</sup> They describe ten negative politeness strategies, which are listed in Table 1.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>6</sup> Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, *Politeness: some universals in language usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 61.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 70.

Table 1. Brown and Levinson's Negative Politeness Strategies<sup>9</sup>

Strategy	Example
1. Be conventionally indirect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you pass the salt?</li> </ul>
2. Question, hedge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take this out, will you?</li> <li>• Would you close the window, if you don't mind?</li> <li>• I wonder if John went out.</li> <li>• If the door's locked, I have a key.</li> </ul>
3. Be pessimistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't suppose there's any chance of you...</li> <li>• You don't have any manila envelopes, do you by any chance?</li> </ul>
4. Minimize the imposition, R <sub>x</sub>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I just want to ask you if I can borrow a tiny bit of paper.</li> </ul>
5. Give deference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excuse me, sir, but would you mind if I close the window?</li> <li>• I think I must be absolutely stupid but I simply can't understand this map.</li> </ul>
6. Apologize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm sure you must be very busy, but...</li> <li>• I hesitate to trouble you, but...</li> <li>• I'm sorry to bother you...</li> </ul>
7. Impersonalize S and H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It would be appreciated if...</li> <li>• That letter must be typed immediately.</li> </ul>
8. State the FTA as a general rule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passengers will please refrain from flushing toilets on the train.</li> </ul>
9. Nominalize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An urgent request is made for your cooperation.</li> <li>• It is our regret that we cannot...</li> </ul>
10. Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'd be eternally grateful if you would...</li> </ul>

There are situations, however, when politeness strategies are not utilized. Brown and Levinson refer to these instances as when the speech is "bald on record."<sup>10</sup> They elaborate, "The prime reason for bald-on-record usage may be stated simply: in general, whenever S wants to do the FTA with maximum efficiency *more than* he wants to satisfy H's face, even to any degree, he will choose the bald-on-record strategy."<sup>11</sup> For example, emergency situations could justify bald-on-record usage ("Help me!")<sup>12</sup> Another motivation for bald-on-record usage can occur in task-oriented situations: "where the focus of interaction is task-oriented, face redress may be felt to be irrelevant, as in: (19) Lend me a hand here. (20) Give me the nails. (21) That's wrong; the gap should be bigger. Such task-orientation probably

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 133-210.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 96.

accounts for the paradigmatic form of instructions and recipes: (22) Open other end. (23) Add three cups of flour and stir vigorously.”<sup>13</sup>

Susana Murcia-Bielsa’s study of directive expressions in appliance instruction manuals cites additional reasons that bald-on-record usage may be acceptable in instruction manuals. She suggests<sup>14</sup> that politeness is not a significant factor in instructions because following the instructions benefits the reader.<sup>15</sup> She explains, “The imperative in instructions is not considered impolite because, rather than the writer leaving no option and imposing her authority, there is no other option if the product is to be used correctly and without problems. ... The directions ... are imposed by the circumstances, rather than by an individual’s will, therefore they do not call for negative politeness strategies.”<sup>16</sup> In addition to considering the benefit to the user, she also recognizes the authority relationship in an instructional text setting is different than face-to-face settings:

In instructions the writer adopts a position of authority which is acknowledged by the reader. This authority is not given by social status but by the instructor’s superior knowledge about the product. The writer instructs a hypothetical reader who does not know how to use the product properly. It is precisely this instructor’s superior knowledge that makes it possible to use straight directives and modalised directives with *must* which are considered impolite in most situations.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, she also suggests that the importance of clarity trumps any concern for politeness: “The instructions accompanying any product are the key to making the most out of it, and therefore it is important that the actions are clearly stated. This is best achieved by using a direct style that draws the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>14</sup> Susana Murcia-Bielsa, “The Choice of Directive Expressions in English and Spanish Instructions: A Semantic Network,” in *Discourse and community: doing functional linguistics*, ed. Eija Ventola (Gunter Narr Verlag, 2000), 125.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

reader's attention to the actions in the task plan, rather than using the sophisticated expressions whose main aim is to lessen the 'threat' posed by the directives."<sup>18</sup>

To summarize, Brown and Levinson and Murcia-Bielsa suggest that instruction manuals need not use politeness strategies because:

- Manuals are task-oriented.
- Following the instructions is to the benefit of the reader.
- The reader acknowledges the writer's position of authority, giving him/her the right to give directives.
- Clarity of instructions is more important than politeness.

Still, the fact that politeness strategies aren't strictly necessary doesn't mean that they are never used in instruction manuals. Riley has analyzed the use of positive politeness techniques in instructional manuals and demonstrated that secondary manuals such as the *Dummies* series use these techniques extensively to create rapport with the reader.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the face-threatening acts incurred by directives are threats to the negative face, not to the positive face, so if politeness strategies were used, we might expect them to be directed to the negative face. Therefore, in this case study, I reviewed a manual for the usage of negative politeness strategies.

### 3. Methods

Unlike Riley, who compared positive politeness strategies used in one primary and two secondary manuals, I chose one primary manual for my analysis. The manual chosen was *QuickBooks 2011 The Official Guide*.<sup>20</sup> This guide, published by McGraw Hill, is the official manual recommended by Intuit for

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>19</sup> K. Riley, "About face: comparing positive politeness in Dummies and conventional software documentation," in *Professional Communication Conference, 2003. IPCC 2003. Proceedings. IEEE International*, 2003, 12 pp.

<sup>20</sup> Leslie Capachietti, *QuickBooks 2011 The Official Guide*, 1st ed. (McGraw-Hill Osborne Media, 2010).

users of their small business accounting software. The software itself comes with only a quick-start guide and brief installation instructions, with too little text to be useful for this analysis.

Due to time constraints, I limited my analysis to the first section of the guide (141 pages). I carefully read this section and noted whenever a negative politeness strategy was used.

#### 4. Results

Fifty-five instances of negative politeness strategies were noted (see Table 2). The majority of those instances used either Strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect (22 uses) or Strategy 4: Minimize the imposition,  $R_x$  (21 uses). Of the remaining strategies, four were used fewer than five times, and four strategies were never used.

Table 2. Counts of Negative Politeness Strategies Used in Part One of *QuickBooks 2011*

Strategy	Uses
1. Be conventionally indirect	22
2. Question, hedge	4
3. Be pessimistic	-
4. Minimize the imposition, $R_x$	21
5. Give deference	-
6. Apologize	2
7. Impersonalize S and H	3
8. State the FTA as a general rule	3
9. Nominalize	-
10. Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H	-
Total	55

The first instance of Strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect occurred on page 5: “It is also a good time to be thinking about any other information you want to track for each of the items you carry in inventory.” Many of the phrases using this strategy utilized the phrase: “It’s a good idea to”; for example, “It’s a good idea to create a password to limit access to your company file...” (page 12). The

word “consider” was also used several times, as in, “You may want to consider using one of the following methods...” (page 57).

Phrases using the next most common strategy (Minimize the imposition) often included the word “just”; for example, “You just pick the customer, enter a little information, and move on to the next invoice” (page 3). This example also used the minimizing word “little.” Several instances of this strategy both acknowledged the complexity of the task and gave assurance to the user that it could be successfully completed. For example:

- “Be prepared; this process has a lot of tasks to wade through, but the good news is it’s a one-time-only job.” (page 2)
- “As you can see, items are a bit more complicated than you may have thought, but creating and configuring them is a task that’s easy to accomplish if you follow the directions in this chapter—I promise.” (page 101)

The next most common strategy—Strategy 2: Question, hedge—was used only four times. This strategy was somewhat difficult to identify. It is often necessary for the author to give the user a choice between which option is more appropriate for their situation, and this isn’t necessarily a hedge—it seems the only way to communicate that what should be selected or what will be displayed on the screen can vary. For example, I did not code this sentence as using Strategy 2: “If you created your company file in QuickBooks 2011 (instead of updating the file from a previous version of QuickBooks), some account types display a button labeled Select From Examples in the Add New Account dialog” (page 33). In contrast, I did code this sentence as using the strategy: “If you prefer, you can change the name of the file...” (page 13), because the author was avoiding directly telling the user whether or not to change the name.

Three uses of Strategy 7: Impersonalize S and H were noted. The first usage—“If there are unpaid withholding amounts from payroll, they must be entered...” (page 4)—doesn’t directly state that

the user must enter the amounts, but it's clearly an instruction to the user to enter them. A second usage—"QuickBooks needs these two key pieces of information..." (page 5)—identifies the software, rather than the author, as the agent making the request of the user/reader. Similarly, the third usage—"The Challenge Question section is mandatory" (page 64)—does not identify who has made the section mandatory, but only that it is.

The other strategy used only three times was Strategy 8: State the FTA as a general rule. Two uses of this strategy were similar to uses of Strategy 1 (which, as noted, often used the phrase "It's a good idea to..."): "Most experienced users find it better to create a folder on your hard drive for your QuickBooks data" (page 13), and "It's not uncommon to clean up your chart of accounts..." (page 38). The third use occurred in a warning: "Making changes to the Customer Name field may result in some unintended consequences." (page 55).

The final strategy used was Strategy 6: Apologize. This strategy was used only twice, and in some ways, it's surprising that it was used at all in a primary manual, as the makers of QuickBooks would be understandably leery of acknowledging any weaknesses in their product. Perhaps because the official guide was written by an outside consultant, one usage occurred when discussing the inability to delete a customer from the system if the customer has ever been involved in a transaction recorded by the system. The author begins, "I have heard from many users who complain that they can't remove a customer that is essentially 'dead wood' on their Customers & Jobs list. The customer has a zero balance..." (page 59). Then comes the closest thing to an apology for this software limitation: "*Unfortunately*, a zero balance doesn't matter..." (page 59, emphasis added). The other use of this strategy apologized for a frustrating part of doing business, not directly related to the QuickBooks software: "I can hear the groans. I know—there's nothing worse than doing physical inventory" (page 123).



## 5. Conclusion

This study suggests that although politeness strategies may not be required in an instruction manual setting, they were used in the manual studied, and in my opinion the clarity of the instructions was not affected. (Future work would be needed to compare the clarity of versions with and without politeness strategies.) This may be due to the fact that the most frequently used strategy—Be conventionally indirect—operates, by definition, according to “conventional indirectness, the use of phrases and sentences that have contextually unambiguous meanings (by virtue of conventionalization).”<sup>21</sup> Although some of the instructions may have been stated indirectly, the strategy used ensures that the meaning is still obvious.

The other most commonly used strategy (Minimize the imposition,  $R_x$ ), rather than getting in the way of clarity, serves to encourage the user to persevere through the complex task of setting up the software. Stressing how easy a task is gives the user confidence to perform it. In fact, this strategy was suggested by Steehouder and Loorbach as a means to make instructions more motivational. They state, “Confidence or self efficacy is one of the most important factors that influence the success of learning processes in general, and undoubtedly this also holds true for the success of user instructions.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, the use of positive politeness strategies can actually make instruction manuals more effective.

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<sup>21</sup> Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, 132.

<sup>22</sup> M. Steehouder and N. Loorbach, “How can we make user instructions motivational?,” in *Professional Communication Conference, 2004. IPCC 2004. Proceedings. International, 2004*, 102.

## 6. Appendix

Table 3. Examples of Negative Politeness Strategies Used in *QuickBooks 2011*

Strategy	Examples
1. Be conventionally indirect	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "It is also a good time to be thinking about any other information you want to track for each of the items you carry in inventory." (page 5)</li> <li>2. "It's a good idea to create a password to limit access to your company file..." (page 12)</li> <li>3. "It's also a good idea to keep all the payroll withholding liabilities accounts ... together." (page 29)</li> <li>4. "It's best not to enter any figures in the Opening Balance field of any account..." (page 35)</li> <li>5. "It's best to avoid using multiple levels of subaccounts..." (page 37)</li> <li>6. "While you can create a new customer on the fly ... entering all your existing customers and jobs during your QuickBooks set up is a better idea..." (page 42)</li> <li>7. "It's good practice to enter them last name first..." (page 42)</li> <li>8. "It's best <i>not</i> to use this field." (page 43, emphasis in original)</li> <li>9. "It's better to skip this field..." (page 44)</li> <li>10. "It's worth spending the time to design some rules for the way data is entered." (page 46)</li> <li>11. "QuickBooks won't prevent you from continuing to sell to and invoice the customer, but you should consider rejecting the order..." (page 48)</li> <li>12. "Unless you're absolutely sure that this is the only job this customer is ever going to award to you, it's better to create a discrete job." (page 56)</li> <li>13. "You may want to consider using one of the following methods..." (page 57)</li> <li>14. "In most cases, it's easier to enter their information before you start entering transactions." (page 70)</li> <li>15. "It's a good idea to think through how you want to enter information in the Vendor Name field." (page 71)</li> <li>16. "It's best <i>not</i> to enter anything in the Opening Balance field." (page 71, emphasis in original)</li> <li>17. "Consider using Vendor Name entries that contain the name of the form number or type of tax you are remitting." (page 72)</li> <li>18. "It's useful to add that field to the columns." (page 78)</li> <li>19. "If you decide to use classes, it's a good idea to create a class for general overhead expenses." (page 92)</li> <li>20. "You can create a sales tax item ... by following these steps..." (page 108)</li> <li>21. "It's always a good idea to check in with your local taxing authority prior to setting up your sales tax codes and items." (page 109)</li> <li>22. "The system doesn't prevent you from using the duplicate number, but it's a good idea to heed the warning to avoid problems." (page 115)</li> </ol>
2. Question, hedge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "If you prefer, you can change the name of the file..." (page 13)</li> </ol>

Strategy	Examples
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. "If you wish, you can change the label..." (page 23)</li> <li>3. "If you decide to store this information..." (page 49)</li> <li>4. "If you'd prefer, you can print them all in a batch..." (page 120)</li> </ul>
3. Be pessimistic	<i>None noted</i>
4. Minimize the imposition, R <sub>x</sub>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "Be prepared; this process has a lot of tasks to wade through, but the good news is it's a one-time-only job." (page 2)</li> <li>2. "It sounds like a lot of work, but it really isn't." (page 3)</li> <li>3. "You just pick the customer, enter a little information, and move on to the next invoice." (page 3)</li> <li>4. "You have all this information, of course; you just have to get it together." (page 4)</li> <li>5. "Remember, you're using QuickBooks and it knows accounting, so you don't have to be an expert in the language of accounting." (page 7)</li> <li>6. "The questions are clearly stated and easy to answer." (page 14)</li> <li>7. "Just click the Quick Start Center button on the Home page to return to this window." (page 18)</li> <li>8. "All you have to do is create your own plan..." (page 28)</li> <li>9. "Creating accounts is a piece of cake." (page 31)</li> <li>10. "Creating the sub-subaccounts is as easy as creating the first level subaccounts..." (page 37)</li> <li>11. "If you want to add multiple customers at once ... you can do so quite easily using the Add/Edit Multiple List Entry window." (page 49)</li> <li>12. "You don't even have to select a customer's listing to see the current balance because the balances for all your customers are right in front of you." (page 53)</li> <li>13. "That's all there is to it..." (page 63)</li> <li>14. "You'll definitely want to use this feature as it's a great way to save time and ensure accuracy when filling out vendor bills or writing checks." (page 73)</li> <li>15. "That's all there is to it..." (page 82)</li> <li>16. "As you can see, items are a bit more complicated than you may have thought, but creating and configuring them is a task that's easy to accomplish if you follow the directions in this chapter—I promise." (page 101)</li> <li>17. "While Service items are relatively simple to create, Inventory items require a bit more planning." (page 102)</li> <li>18. "It's very easy to use: simply list the subtotal item..." (page 105)</li> <li>19. "It's not difficult to create codes to track sales tax status in a manner more detailed than taxable and nontaxable: you just add new sales tax codes to fit your needs." (page 109)</li> <li>20. "The pre-QuickBooks opening trial balance doesn't have to be fancy—it can be created in Excel or on a piece of paper." (page 134)</li> <li>21. "If you follow the steps outlined in this chapter and work closely with your accountant, establishing accurate opening balances can be a surprisingly straightforward and angst-free process." (page 141)</li> </ul>
5. Give deference	<i>None noted</i>

Strategy	Examples
6. Apologize	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “Unfortunately, a zero balance doesn’t matter...” (page 59)</li> <li>2. “I can hear the groans. I know—there’s nothing worse than doing physical inventory.” (page 123)</li> </ol>
7. Impersonalize S and H	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “If there are unpaid withholding amounts from payroll, they must be entered...” (page 4)</li> <li>2. “QuickBooks needs these two key pieces of information...” (page 5)</li> <li>3. “The Challenge Question section is mandatory.” (page 64)</li> </ol>
8. State the FTA as a general rule	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “Most experienced users find it better to create a folder on your hard drive for your QuickBooks data.” (page 13)</li> <li>2. “It’s not uncommon to clean up your chart of accounts...” (page 38)</li> <li>3. “Making changes to the Customer Name field may result in some unintended consequences.” (page 55)</li> </ol>
9. Nominalize	<i>None noted</i>
10. Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H	<i>None noted</i>