

Politeness in Emails Exchanged between English and Persian Speakers

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Abstract

Nowadays, intercultural communication via email among various groups and societies has been increasingly important as an aspect of communication. This research aims at investigating aspects of politeness meaning negotiation via emails exchanged between English and Persian speakers with different cultural backgrounds. The present study also reveals the potentials for using emails to experience culture as a process of meaning negotiation. To do this, 18 English and Persian speakers (aged 22-60) were asked to exchange emails for 12 weeks. After collecting the required samples, the interplay between the computer-mediated communication, speech act and politeness is explored by using the analytical frameworks of Hyme's ethnography of communication (1974), Searle's speech act theory (1969) and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). The methodology of this research is descriptive analytical. The results of this research show that "politeness" is not a stable construct. Rather it is constantly (re)negotiated by the interactants who take into account the relevant contextualization cues. In addition saving the face of the sender and the receiver is concerned simultaneously in the process of email exchanging.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication, Email, Meaning Negotiation, Politeness, Speech Act

Received: February 2014; Accepted: December 2014

1. Introduction

The widespread use of Computer-mediated communication (CMC) nowadays has increased the connection between different people from different nationalities and backgrounds. CMC is a kind of communication that takes place between humans via some types of computer, such as a desktop, mobile phone or similar (December, 1997, p. 5; Ferris, 1997; Herring, 2003, p. 612, as cited in Hardaker, 2010). Regarding time, communication can occur as asynchronous and synchronous. In CMC, email represents the asynchronous communication while Internet Relay Chat (IRC) exemplifies synchronous communication (Smith, Alvarez- Torres, & Zhao, 2003, p. 705). “In terms of space, CMC technologies have varying capacities for supporting the manipulation of spatial distances for communication. Email and chat, for example, allow relatively little control over spatial distances, while graphical chat programs such as Palace and Microsoft Chat allow participants to control the spatial arrangement of the settings, their avatars, and other objects” (p. 708). Hardaker (2010) also points out that “CMC can benefit users by providing fast and easy communication between those separated by time and space, and it can also provide various degrees of anonymity”. Email gives participants more opportunities to control over planning, composing, editing, and delivering messages than face- to- face communication (Herring, 2002; Walther, 1996, as cited in Duthler, 2006). Non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions or prosodic aspects are not available in email, but there are other cues such as emoticons and orthographic emphasis like capitalization (Neurauter- Kessels,2011). Because of the difficulties in accessing people’s private emails, they have not been very much investigated. To this end, Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1987) was appealed to in our research as a useful vehicle for investigating meaning negotiation and intercultural

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understanding in email exchange communication. Izadi and Zilaie (2012) state that “social human beings rely heavily on interpersonal relationships for a smooth communication with each other. As such, politeness stands out as to harmonize interactions and foster interpersonal relations between the members of a society” (p. 86).

According to Terkourafi (1995), the study of politeness within linguistic pragmatics first began with the fleeting reference to politeness in the works of Grice (1967, as cited in 1989a) and Searle (1975, as cited in 1996), but several linguists, sociologists and anthropologist (Fraser, 1990; Gu, 1990; Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983) have studied politeness as their subject matter since the influential work of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) on this theory. The core of this theory is the concept of ‘face’ which according to Brown and Levinson’s acknowledgment, is introduced by Goffman’s (1967) classic account of politeness and the English folk notion of face. This theory has been challenged for not being able to stand up to cross-cultural studies by many politeness theorists or researches in cross-cultural communication. Janney and Ardnt (1993) argue that Brown and Levinson’s theory is specifically considering an Anglo-western cultural context that cannot be applicable in some non-Western cultures. Scollon and Scollon (1995) believe that the idea of face as a self-image is inappropriate for Asian communities. Hayashi (1996) also criticizes this theory for being constructed on the basis of speech act theory which is characterized by a philosophical analysis of sentences in isolation (p. 228). In spite of the mentioned criticisms about the politeness theory, it is still used in politeness studies especially in CMC context. Adopting Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1987) and Searle’s theory of speech act (1969) as the theoretical framework, this article explores the meaning negotiation in exchanging emails among 18 English and Persian speakers (aged 22-60) with

different cultural backgrounds. By analyzing the speech act and politeness strategies in the email correspondence exchanged by each pair of participants for a period of 12 weeks, this study investigates the politeness meaning negotiations between them. The insights gain from this study does not apply merely to the understanding of language use in email but also highlight the pedagogical importance of CMC in language education.

2. Review of Literature and Theoretical Grounding

Wealth of studies have been done to examine the possibility of using email exchanges in teaching language (Warschauer, 1999, 2000; Liaw & Johnson, 2001; Meskill & Krassimira, 2000). Exchanging of emails to raise the learners' cultural competence also has been the focus of some other studies in recent years (e.g., Kern, 1995; Soh & Soon, 1991). These studies have indicated that students show more progress in communication when writing emails to real recipients and get more acquainted with the target culture (Hsieh, 2009, p. 10). Studies addressing the increase of language learners' cultural knowledge and intercultural awareness developed via email interactions abound. However, not many studies have been carried out on the process of meaning negotiation between the interactants.

Based on the researchers' view of meaning as co-constructed in interactions which is in line with Widdowson (2007), the present research explores the meaning of intercultural communication by seeing the process of transmitting politeness meaning via email. As Nash (2006) maintains, misunderstanding can occur from different views of politeness. He also mentions that polite behavior and speech in one culture can actually be perceived as impolite in another culture. In the interactive analysis, speech acts are used as the basic unit of analysis. Chaika (1994) defines speech acts as "the ways people use language

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to manage their social interaction” (p. 153). The crucial role of speech acts in interpersonal communication is so obvious and we will challenge such aspects of communication in this study. As words do not always stand for their literal meaning, but mean different things in different situations according to Searle (1969), he also posits that “the chief motivation- though not the only motivation- for using these indirect forms is politeness” (Searle, 1975, as cited in 1996, p. 177, 1979). Due to the given facts, the analysis of speech acts will be essential because of its relevancy to the politeness meaning.

In order to communicate with others, one should not neglect what is appropriate and what is inappropriate to say in certain cultural contexts (Yule, 1996). This then led to the study of politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) based their analysis of linguistic politeness on the concept of face (Goffman, 1967) which is defined as “the public self- image that all the members of the society seek to claim for themselves”. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that this image consists of two related aspects: “negative face” (the desire not to be imposed upon, intruded, or otherwise put on) and “positive face” (the desire to be liked, wanted, appreciated or approved of). Positive politeness strategies address others’ positive face wants, whereas negative politeness strategies address their negative face by showing distance and impersonality (Wilson, Aleman & Leatham, 1998). Findings of the studies done by some scholars indicate that situation or context affects face and that face wants differ based on the situation (see Blum-Kulka, 1987; Craig, Tracy & Spisak, 1986; Meyer, 2002). By preserving face in interaction, people contribute in successful social relationships, so participants try to preserve their self-image while simultaneously attempt not to attack the image of the other. However some speech acts endanger the speaker/sender’s or the hearer/recipient’s positive or negative face and are called “Face- Threatening Acts” or FTAs. In Brown and

Levinson's(1987) term, the individual encountered with the necessity to perform an FTA, must select between doing the FTA in the most straight and competent manner or trying to soften the effect of the FTA on the hearer's positive/ negative face.

Brown and Levinson (1987) named these mitigation strategies as politeness ones. Thus when a speaker needs to perform an FTA, s/he may use one of the five different politeness strategies: (1) perform the FTA directly, perform the FTA with compensation by using (2) positive or (3) negative politeness strategies, (4) perform the FTA indirectly or (5) simply avoid doing the FTA (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 69-70). As Mazid (2006) points out, "What it means to be polite, when and why people need to be polite, and how they indicate politeness inevitably varies from one culture to another and from one context to another". Scholars have mainly examined Politeness theory in face-to-face communication (e.g., Duthler, 2006; Herring, 1994; Morand & Ocker, 2003; Sussman & Sproull, 1999), but limited numbers have been conducted to explore it in CMC. To narrow the just mentioned lacuna in politeness studies via email interactions, the current study constitutes a modest attempt to explore the given aspects. Speech act and Politeness are important theories because the first tries to investigate the linguistic performance of the email context while the latter is used to examine the pragmatic function of the act within the communicative event. Regarding their insufficiency in the investigation of cross-cultural communication, these two theories have to consider the contextualized factors to explain the intricacies of interactive behavior.

3. Objectives of the Study

Whereas some studies (e.g., Fraser, 1990; Gu, 1990; Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983) have addressed various aspects of politeness in intercultural communication via email, few studies have been conducted cross culturally among Iranian and English interactants. The present study purported to investigate (1) how English and Persian participants accomplish their intercultural understanding in emails, (2) determine the effective factors in enhancing the development of intercultural understanding in emails, (3) indicate the formation, negotiation and transmission of the meaning of politeness via email.

More specifically, the present study is an attempt to address and answer the following research questions:

- 1- What are the subject matter and themes in emails exchanged between the participants in this study?
- 2- How the meaning of politeness is expressed in email exchange communication?
- 3- What is the role of email in intercultural communication and understanding?

The intersection between CMC, culture and language is examined by extracting the meaning of politeness fulfilled in speech acts.

4. Method

4.1. Participants and Procedure

A final number of 18 English and Persian speakers participated in this study. The Persian speakers majoring in different fields were informed via the bulletin boards of Shahid Chamran University and Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz branch. They were chosen through cluster random sampling. Selected online,

the English speakers were the authors' relatives, friends and their native friends from England, Canada and the United States include both genders with an age ranged from 22 to 60 and were required to exchange emails for a period of 12 weeks. Problems of confidentiality and anonymity in computer-mediated discourse sound to be crucial to the ethical focus. All the participants were introduced to each other by their real names during the actual email correspondence. On the other hand, to preserve the interactants' anonymity and the confidentiality of the data source, they were given pseudonyms during the data analysis. It was essential to collect more qualitative data from the participants for a relatively long time with the purpose of directing more contextualized examinations of speech acts and politeness strategies. To analyze data discursively, a discussion of different qualitative data such as a pre-survey questionnaire, emails, e-journals and e-interviews were included in this study. Consequently, the participants were asked to send us a copy of all their emails and one e-journal every week for the time span of 3 months. E-journals gave the participants the opportunity to write about their e-pals, ideas and emotions all through the project. E-interviews were conducted with the participants at the end of the project, to explain problems appearing in their email exchanges. As various problems came out between each dyad, every member of each pair was asked different interview questions. The interpretive analysis was supported by triangulation of these qualitative data. Interactive and discursive insight into the understanding of meaning construction in email is the outcome of the linguistic and pragmatic analyses of speech acts and politeness meaning. To elaborate the given aspects analysis the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this study are presented in the chart below.

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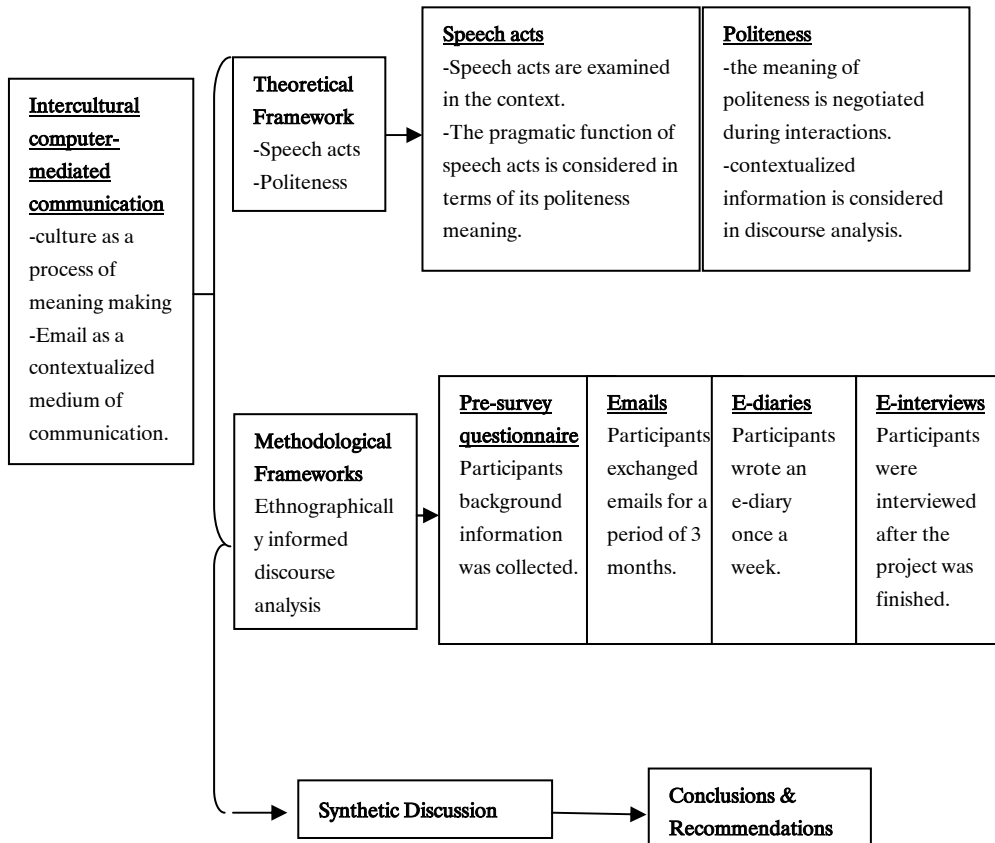


Figure1. The Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks of the Research
(Searle, 1969; Brown & Levinson, 1987)

5. Data Analysis

This study used a time series design. The data collection took place over a 3 month period. For the purposes of this study, the participant’s e-mails analyzed in terms of the following stages:

- a. Identifying the seminal exchanges within the communicative event for each pair.

- b. Examining the used speech acts in the communicative event.
- c. Studying the meaning of politeness acts in the context achieved by the speech acts.
- d. Making a summary of the ethnographically informed analysis for the interaction between speech acts, politeness strategies and communicative event in the email exchanges communication.

Because of rigid constraints of space, the focus of this study is on the events among others which appeared to be critical to the development of the participants' intercultural understanding and interpersonal relationships, in the light of observations from the participants' email entries, e- journals and e-interviews. Thus in this article, just one critical communicative event as an exchanged email on the basis of given aspects is analyzed.

5.1. Pair 2- A new job experience

Participants' profiles

- John

John, a 40- year old electrical engineer, likes to learn about Iranian culture, language and history. He is an American- born Iranian who can speak and write only in English. He had been to Iran and has a few Iranian friends. By participating in this research, John is hoping to make new friends.

- Mina

Mina, a 36- year-old Iranian female from Ahvaz, is an English teacher in a language institute and also an M.A student. She is an English major who has studied English for 10 years. Mina likes to make new friends. To elaborate the interactions between the participants we focused on the aspects of communicative events.

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John and Mina wrote to each other almost every day or every other day from the beginning of the project. We received a total of 76 emails from them during the 12 weeks. Since they wrote so frequently, they shared many of the details of their lives.

They wrote about common social relationships, books, their favorite movies and even their private matters. As a result of their frequent email exchanges, they had come to know one another pretty well by the week when this communicative event took place. The emails below were extracted from week 8. In this communicative event, Mina wrote to John about the uncomfortable situation of her job in the new language school. In John's response to Mina's email, he expressed his concern. Through the analysis, we attempt to show how close rapport was developed and maintained in the email interactions of this pair. In the following part we want to analyze one of the participants' email depending on the notion of speech act.

Extract P. Week 8 Mina to John

- | |
|---|
| <p>*
*
*
32. Honestly, I'm happy to have a job and trying a new experience.
33. As an English teacher, I'm working in a language institute.
34. There is an administrator who interferes in everything.
35. She is eavesdropping behind the door of my classroom.
36. I'm fortunate to have this job anyway because there are many candidates for this opportunity and I've succeeded to get it.
37. I'm very glad to talk to you about my new experience.
38. Then, as I'm the winner, please consider them seriously. lol
39. Enjoy your weekend. :)
40. Waiting for your emails.</p> |
|---|

(* indicates that sentences have been omitted)

Extract Q. W

Extract Q . Week 8 John to Mina

- | |
|---|
| <p>*
*
*</p> <p>19. This is cool that you have something real and can tell about it.</p> <p>20. If you were a jobless and disappointed person, exchanging such a number of emails with those interesting topics was impossible for sure. lol (just kidding).</p> <p>21. In fact I'm happy you got the job.</p> <p>22. But we learn many things from these moments as they help us to flourish and be strong.</p> <p>23. I'll catch you later.</p> |
|---|

6. Analysis of Mina's Email

6.1. Mina's Speech Act Analysis

6.1.1. Repetition

As mentioned above, Mina and John wrote to each other very often after the first week. Sharing their daily lives with one another had become a routine for them. In this email correspondence, Mina gave a narrative of the situation of her new job experience. Along with the story, she also stated her feelings about the experience.

The main kind of speech act that she used to express her feelings and her experience was the expressive speech act. Mina began the paragraph with a statement: "Honestly, I'm happy to have a job and trying a new experience" (line 32). Since the statement was confusing without further explanations, the

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statement may have been used as an opening statement to draw John's attention to the story that followed. After initiating the topic, Mina vividly described her experience in looking for a job to teach in language institutes and her competition with the other competitors to get this job (line 32- 37). Then she rephrased what she had stated in the opening line about how lucky she was to get this job. According to Urban (1994), by using paraphrase or gloss, "meaning circulates or is communicated despite the difference in the surface form" (p. 147). Tannen (1989), also argues that the forms of repetition can range from "exact repetition (the same words uttered in the same rhythmic pattern) to paraphrase (similar ideas in different words) (p. 54). In line with Tannen and Urban's assertions, we also interpret that meaning of the two sentences in lines 32 and 37 was repeated, even though Mina did not use the exact lexicons and phrases.

With respect to repetition, Norrick (1988) classifies the purposes of repetitions as "second- speaker repetition" which means that the second speaker repeats what s/he has heard to acknowledge, concur or accept a formulation; express surprise or disbelief; match claim, contradict or correct; think aloud or play on a phrase for humor; and "same- speaker repetition" has the functions of holding the floor, bridging an interruption, ensuring exact precise understanding, increasing coherence, repeating with stress and repeating with expansion. On the basis of Norrick's view, Mina's email contains "same- speaker repetition". The repetition in Mina's case can be considered to function as follows:

a. Extending coherence

The first purpose serves to extend coherence. The two repeated sentences were placed at the beginning and at the end of the paragraph. Since the main new job experience story was given in between the two repeated sentences, it could

be inferred that the first sentence was to indicate the beginning of the story and the second was to signify the end of it. Similarly Tannen (1989) also suggests that repetition could function to establish coherence.

b. Emphasizing Mina's feeling

The second purpose serves to emphasize Mina's feeling. Beyond doubt, Mina's new job environment must have not been comfortable. Yet, rather than complaining about the unpleasant experience, Mina seemed to be grateful and happy for getting the job. Her first sentence (line 32) indicated her gratefulness to find a new job and her repeated sentence (line 37) showed her happiness in being able to write about the job. Both "happy" (line 32) and "glad" (line 37) are adjectives to describe emotions. According to Searle's speech act taxonomy (1969; 1979; 1996) the expression of feelings or emotions on a psychological state is categorized as an expressive speech act. The intensifier "very" was used to strengthen the emotional state "glad" in line 37.

6.1.2. Non- Lexical Expression in Persian to Show Written- Out Laughter

Following this paragraph, Mina made a joke and concluded that since she searched a lot to find this job and won the competition of getting it, John should cherish her email more (line 38). She wrote, "Then, as I'm the winner, please consider them seriously. ﻟﻮ ﻟﻮ". This sentence, though appearing to be a directive speech act at first glance, could work as an intensifier for the previous expressive sentence. This inference is drawn on the basis of the following considerations:

First, the sentence began with a conjunction "then" to indicate its close relation with something which has been written previously. Thus, the final sentence clearly means that Mina was asking John to read her emails carefully because she had just been the winner of a competition.

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Second, it could be discerned from the written-out laughter at the end of the sentence that Mina intended this statement to be a joke. Since the statement seemed more like a joke than a request, it was necessary to explore the meaning of the sentence from its context.

Concluding from the above two points, it seems safe to suggest that “line 38” should not be considered a literal request to her e-pal, but as a humorous reinforcement of what she had described previously. Since the sentence’s linguistic meaning did not correspond to Mina’s intended communicative meaning, our interpretation of “line 38” is that it was meant to be read as a humorous remark. In what follows, we turn to the politeness implications carried with the notion of “humor”.

6.2. Mina’s Politeness Analysis

Having looked at the speech act in Mina’s email, we next look at the politeness features which went hand in hand with the expressive act. In this section, we discuss how such concepts as “intimacy” and “rapport” were transmitted through Mina’s comment on her new job experience. To do this, we stipulate over work on two following stages:

a. Promoting Close Understanding:

The arrangement of the sentences in the passage demonstrated Mina’s intention of boosting John’s status by showing that he was important to her. As discussed before, in Mina’s email, the sentence (line 36) which expressed similar meaning to that of her first sentence (line 32), could be seen as an intensifier. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), exaggerations are used by the speaker as a positive politeness strategy to assert interest, approval or sympathy with the hearer. Besides, the same-speaker repetition here is also

used as an intensifier to show this exaggeration too. To flatter John by showing how she valued their email correspondence, Mina revealed her desire to develop close rapport with John and this is another positive politeness strategy according to Brown and Levinson (1987) that the speaker shares some of his wants to intensify the interest of his own to communicate with the hearer (line 38).

b. Developing Familiarity and Solidarity

Mina's narrative also attempted to build solidarity between her and John. This inference was drawn from the two observations based on the sentence, "then, I'm the winner, please consider my emails seriously. lol" (line 38). It is conjectured that Mina intended to use humor to create intimacy.

According to Norrick (1988) most conversational joking develops from antecedent talk. Mina's joke was no exception (p. 2). Mina's joke, when seen together with her prior sentence, seemed to presuppose how much she valued John's friendship and John should also consider her a close friend. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that jokes are used by the speaker as a positive politeness strategy to assert common ground with the hearer. It is Brown and Levinson's view that "jokes may be used to stress that shared background or those shared values" (1987, p. 124). Their view on jokes had revealed an important element in making a joke, which is the closeness of a relationship. Before one can share values with another person, one must get to know that person to a certain degree.

Mina expressed a similar view on making jokes in her e- interview. She wrote, "We became more and more familiar with each other, which enabled us to tease each other or say something funny and nonsense" (Mina's first e-interview). From this reflection, it can be confirmed that her joke was made on

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the basis of her evaluation of their relationship and her belief that they had similar feelings for one another. Her reflection should support our view about the use of jokes as a strategy to increase the familiarity between Mina and John.

Also, it was noted that Mina could switch the code of languages to extend solidarity. As seen in line 38, the written-out laughter (للهو) in Persian characters was added at the end of the sentence. Laughter is frequently used in email interaction to signify the emotional state of the writer in order to make up for the missing paralinguistic cues found in face-to-face interactions.

The switch of languages in the imitation of laughter written in Persian character in Mina's email, appeared to be based on their mutual understanding from the past interactions. John was very keen on reading and writing in Persian. So, code-switching was not new to John and Mina. Taking this view into the analysis of the written-out laughter in Persian characters, it could be conjectured that the switch of languages was a sign to show their tacit understanding. By writing the laughter in Persian characters, not only did Mina display the humorous intent of the sentence; she also allied herself with John's interest in using Persian words and therefore created greater solidarity between them and this is another positive politeness strategy that Brown and Levinson (1987) put it as "assume or assert reciprocity."

7. Analysis of John's Email

7.1. John's Speech Act Analysis

In line 19, John stated in his response to Mina's email that "This is cool that you have something real and can tell about it". This sentence appeared to resemble what Mina had written in her email about being happy to get the job and glad that could talk to John about it. Syntactically the sentence could be segmented into two parts: John's comment (This is cool) and the rephrase of

Mina's words (You have something real and can tell about it). The combined use of the expressive speech act with the repeated statement was not only to show John's concern with regard to Mina's experience, but also to signify the beginning of the topic.

After shifting the topic of Mina's new job experience in line 19, John made a joke in line 20. Following the joke, John added "In fact, I'm happy you got the job". The adverb "in fact" was used to stress the sincerity of the statement and also to reiterate the joking purpose of the previous sentence. This sentence was a repetition of his first sentence of this passage (line 19). It created coherence in his argument and emphasized John's intention to express his happiness at knowing that Mina has got the job.

7.2. John's Politeness Analysis

It seems that John's joke was meant to strengthen familiarity with Mina. This interpretation was inferred from two aspects of his joke.

a. Showing camaraderie by using jokes

In his article, Norrick (1987) argued that precise repetitions or repetitions with delicate difference are usually used in conversation to make humor and jokes. John not only did repeat some of Mina's words, he further expanded in line 20 on Mina's joke and said that "If you were a jobless and disappointed person, exchanging such a number of emails with those interesting topics was impossible for sure. lol (just kidding)".

Brown and Levinson (1987) discussed that the speaker usually uses a joke as a basic positive politeness strategy to emphasize reciprocally shared knowledge or values with the hearer. In spite of the fact that some researchers have discussed that jokes are sometimes used as a negative politeness strategy

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or might even be face- threatening (Holmes, 1999), it did not appear to be so in John's case. For two reasons, it could be conjectured that John's banter was interpreted as a friendly gesture: 1) His banter was developed from Mina's own joke. By carrying on Mina's joke, John had shown his attention and interest in Mina's email; and 2) Despite the joke, John still revealed his concern for Mina afterwards. The shift of tones had further accentuated the sincerity of John's concern. According to Leech (1983), banter can encourage to develop social intimacy. In line with Leech's view, we argue that the joke which circulated between John and Mina strengthened their relationship. It can be concluded that John's joke, which followed Mina's humorous remark on her new job experience, was intended to build up rapport with Mina.

b. Code- switching as a reciprocally acknowledged routine

Another politeness move in John's joke was the use of code- switching. John, like Mina, also switched and wrote his laughter in Persian characters. In- group identity can be created by the code- switching as a positive politeness strategy according to Brown and Levinson (1987). By involving himself in this code- switching interactive routine, John confirmed his close relationship with Mina and therefore enhanced camaraderie with her.

On the above basis, it seems safe to conclude that John's primary goal in his joke was to further consolidate the relationship between them.

8. Discussion

The manner in which jokes can be used to promote intimate relationships between interactants is explained in this analysis. It has been shown that, the interactants not only created a nice general feeling in their exchanges of emails, but also helped to advance their intimate relationship to each other. During the

analysis, it has been noticed that repetitions occurred in both Mina and John's jokes. Mina repeated her own sentence (same- speaker repetition) whereas John repeated Mina's words (second- speaker repetition)(Norrick, 1988). Even though one is "second- speaker repetition" and the other is "same speaker repetition", they all aimed at developing rapport. Furthermore, code- switching between English and Persian took place in both Mina and John's emails. It was concluded that by adopting this mutually recognized interactive routine, they both wished to create intimacy and reinforce solidarity.

Two more points are noted during the discussion of this data set: a) the virtual characters; b) the meanings of emoticons and written- out laughter.

a) The virtual characters

It is important to note that both Mina and John described themselves as shy and quiet in their pre-survey questionnaire. Meanwhile, considering the numbers of emails exchanged between them in a week, they were believed to be the most active pair among all the participants in this study. In addition, after they had emailed each other for a while, they exchanged photos and discussed the possibility of talking online. Mina described her change to the nature of online communication. She wrote, "Since it is a virtual environment and John won't come to Iran in the last three months, I was just quite frank about everything (1st interview)". She considered that this asynchronous form of online communication had helped her organize her thoughts and say what she really wished to say. She stated, "Email communication helped me to express my true feelings".

Mina's point seemed to echo what the researchers in the present study believed about the fluidity of virtual communication. They argue that in online communication, the fewer constraints on social and cultural expectations and

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also distraction from the speakers' identities have granted interactants more liberty in constructing their virtual- self. Hine (2000, p.118) points out that in the virtual world "there is no guarantee that the identity performances seen in the cyberspace will mirror those performed in offline settings". Turkle (1995) also argues that cyberspace permits people to attempt new identities or express dimensions of identity crashed in offline life. Consistent with what Turkle notes, the researchers in this study suppose that it could be possible for people who do not talk much in face- to- face interaction to reveal more of their thoughts in online communication. While in face- to- face communication interactants are obliged to make immediate responses, the online one gives them more freedom to choose when and how they can make a response. Thus, in Mina and John's case, online communication may have provided a less intimidating social environment for them to talk more freely.

b. The meaning of emoticons and written- out laughter

In this pair's email correspondence, it was common to use smiley faces and written- out laughter. It is usually supposed that smiley face, which is a copy of the meta-communicative features of face-to-face communication, is generally supposed to have similar meaning to written- out laughter. In Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1970) and van Hooff's (1972) terms, smiley faces and laughter in face-to-face communication converge functionally as non-verbal expressions of humor appreciation. In the same line, this view sounds to be useful in many online communication studies, which usually consider emoticons and laughter as a significant sign for conducting humor in computer- mediated contexts (Rezabek & Cochenour, 1998). Yet there still may be a subtle difference between the emoticons and the written- out laughter which leads the writer to prefer one to another in some situations. For instance, John added a smiley

face next to his final salutation “Have a nice week ☺” (week 8). It would be odd in this case, if he had added written- out laughter, which might have rendered his original wish ironic. An example of written- out laughter could be seen in John’s week 10 email, “As for your thoughts on fiancé and Horror films ... lololI will think there is a reason why your fiancé will want to take you to a scary/ horror movie”. In this sentence John was apparently trying to make fun of Mina by suggesting that her fiancé deliberately trying to take her to a horror movie for a purpose. In order to make sure she knows that it was meant to be a joke, he added written- out laughter. If a smiley had been used in this sentence instead of the laughter, it might have made the statement sound more serious and less humorous. In both of the examples, it has been shown that there is a slight difference between the uses of smiley face and of a written- out laughter. However, it is not reasonable to make generalizations from the present examples as the usage of emoticons and written- out laughter may be subject to change with different people in different contexts. As there has been almost new attempt made on distinguishing and discussing the pragmatic use of the two paralinguistic cues in online communication, this issue has been raise here. Based on the increasing use of these features in online communication, it seems reasonable that much more research attention be paid to this issue. The summary of each communicative event of the 9 pairs is mentioned in the following table.

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Table1. Participants' Communicative Events, Speech Acts, Face Works and Politeness Strategies

Pair	Analysis	Communicative Event	Speech Act	Face work	Politeness strategies
	Participants				
1	Rose (Iranian/female)	Family marriage Rose told Linda that her sister wants to get divorce from her husband who is their cosine. She expressed her views on this	Expressive (opinion)	Rose didn't wish Linda's face to be offended by Rose's criticism about an Arab man so she modified her tone in the end	-Hedging opinions -Don't presume
	Linda (British/female)	issue. Linda analyzed what the man was trying to do and said that she completely empathized with Rose's sister			
2	Mina (Iranian/female)	New job experience	Expressive (written-out laughter)	Mina attended to John's positive face by showing intimacy.	- Joke -Use of in group language or dialect
		Mina wrote to John about her new job experience. Mina made a joke about it and suggested that John should			

	John (British/male)	cherish her email for her winning in getting the job. John extended Mina's joke and repeated Mina's code-switching of Persian written-out laughter to signify his intimacy and camaraderie with Mina.	Expressive (repetition)	John supported Mina's positive face by imitating the jokes in Mina's email.	-Joke -Use of in-group language or dialect * Repetition
3	Mohsen (Iranian/male)	American soldiers killed in Iraq	Expressive (expressing different opinions)	Mohsen attacked Jim's face by challenging his argument.	- Bald on record - Rhetorical question
	Jim (American/male)	Jim and Mohsen demonstrated opposing opinions about the American soldiers killed in Iraq. This disagreement provoked a confrontation between the pair.		Assertive (show statistics) Expressive (opinions)	Jim protected his face by countering Mohsen's viewpoints.
4	Lilli (Iranian/Female)	Hijab	Expressive (answer)	Lilli supported Tina's face by approving Tina's views.	-Avoidance of adjustment of reports to hearer's points of view Repetition
	Tina (British/Female)	Tina wrote to show her disagreement with Lilli's Hijab. Instead of showing her disagreement overtly, Lilli used questions (Why girls in Islamic		Expressive (question)	Tina did not wish her disagreement to offend Lilli's face.

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		countries wear Hijab?) to convey her opinions. In reply, Lilli not only satisfied Tina's want to be approved, but also saved her own face in thus defending her decision on Hijab.			markers
5	Arman (Iranian/male)	<p>Iran sanctions</p> <p>Since David's friend was Iranian, Arman raised the topic of political and economic sanctions against Iran with caution.</p>	Commissive (commitment)	Arman made a brief response to avoid possible disagreement which might threaten both David and Nelson's faces.	-Time switch -Avoidance of adjustment of reports to hearer's points of view Repetition
	David (British/male)	<p>He only touched on this issue lightly without giving his personal views. David also did not comment on it but express an interest in learning more about it.</p>			

6	Mehdi (Iranian/ male)	Badinage	Expressive (apology)	Mehdi saved Dick's face want to be liked by assuring Dick that Mehdi's late reply was not due to the lack of interest in Dick's emails but it was because of Mehdi's illness and work. By showing his heavy workload, Mehdi also supported his own face by showing his professional image.	-Apologies (Give overwhelming reasons)
		Dick wrote along email describing his excitement on being an actor in a film but he did not receive any feedback from his e- pal. Instead of showing interest to Dick's role, Mehdi wrote no reply for a week and in his next email mentioned nothing about it.			
	Dick (British/ male)		Expressive (apology)	Dick's apology aimed to protect Mehdi's face. It was to prevent Mehdi from the embarrassment of not having replied.	-Apologies (admit the impingement)
7	Mehrane (Iranian/ Female)	Suit	Expressive (present her opinion)	Mehrane took offence at Sam's short email. She adjusted her email length and the use of	-Change of in-group identity markers/ Address -Vernacular writing style

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		heart and make a proposal. Mehrane gave		vocatives in order to save her own face.	
	Sami (American/male)	Sami some advice from her own experience.	Expressive (conditional clause)	Sam attended to Mehrane's face by showing how he valued her opinions.	-Presuppose common ground* Hedging opinions
8	Negar (Iranian/ Female)	Apologizing Jean asked a question regarding the immigration of Iranians to Canada. The following week	Expressive (greeting, apology)	To boost Jean's face want to be liked, Negar used greetings and salutation which they did not normally used.	-Apologize (indicate reluctance) -Give deference
	Jean (American/Female)	receiving no reply from Negar, she wrote a short apologetic email hoping to discover if she had offended her e-pal. After receiving this second email, Negar immediately wrote back to apologize for not having been able to write back sooner.			
			Expressive (greeting, apology)	Jean was worried that her question might have offended Negar and threatened Negar's face.	-Using in-group identity markers (Address forms) - Apologize

9	Sara (Iranian/ Female)	Experience transmission	Directive (informality of writing)	Sara boosted Jack's positive face by asking for his advice.	-Intensify interest to hear -Self-depreciation to boost Jack's status
	Jack (British/ male)	Sara described the process of an interview in her email and expressed her feelings toward interviews. At the end, she asked Jack for some interview advice. Jack briefly responded with some suggestions. He did not appear to be interested in sharing his experience with Sara.			

9. Conclusions

The present study sets out to investigate the politeness meaning during intercultural communication. Intercultural communication has been introduced as interdisciplinary in this study and different research methods combined to reveal the process of intercultural meaning negotiation in email. This study adopts the concept communicative event proposed by Hymes (1978) which is consistent with what Locher (2004) postulates that "politeness cannot be investigated without looking in detail at the context, the speakers, the situation and the evoked norms" (p. 91). The communicative meaning of an act is influenced by the context in which the act is performed. In this study, contextualized information such as participants' backgrounds, topics,

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interpersonal relationships, and computer- mediated features was the focal cue since it could help the understanding of meaning in the recorded email interactions. It was shown in the present article that the same meaning could be realized in different speech acts, and the same speech act can perform different discourse functions. Because of their widespread use in participants' emails, their various roles, and their linguistic displays in meaning constructions, expressive speech acts have been found significant in this study. It is also maintained that the interpretation of a sentence was more intricate than the speech act taxonomies could account for. No absolute correlations between certain speech acts and their communicative effects were also observed. Therefore, what seems to be polite and appropriate in a context, could be impolite in other contexts. Analyzing the data has indicated that linguistic politeness is not always the same as its pragmatic function. The research undertaken in this study can contribute to the suggestion that instead of considering politeness theory with respect to the strategies saving the hearer's face need, Brown and Levinson's theory could be better understood if the strategies were discussed as the negotiation of face needs between the participants. Thus, interactants use politeness strategies to uphold and defend their own or their e- pals' face need and they can support or attack faces. The basis of this conclusion is the analytical detection of the participant's email exchanges in which the interactants were not just considerate to their e- pals' face need, but also were careful about their own face too. The meaning of politeness due to those examples does not seem a complete notion. In this regard, it seems reasonable to see politeness as the determination of an act that can be explained in their own terms by investigating the contextualized meaning of politeness in emails. In other words, the interchange of views in email conveyed in verbal and non- verbal displays embedded intercultural

communication in itself. As revealed by the analysis in this study, contextualized factors such as topics, interpersonal relationships, communicative norms, age, and so on, can not only affect the writer's language use and politeness meaning, but also shape the recipient's understanding of the message. It is discussed in this study that people bring their knowledge, language and thought to their contacts in email communication. Intercultural communication in the current research is considered as a process of interactive meaning negotiation between the participants, rather than mere comprehension of what has been uttered or written. The participants started interactions, evolved interpersonal understanding and created norms of communication due to their interactions. Based on the collected knowledge from their interactions, the participants then estimated and interpreted the meaning in their e-pals' emails.

As indicated by the data analysis of this study, participants used electronic paralanguage to express their emotions, ideas and viewpoints. Electronic paralanguage assists the negotiation of politeness meaning in exchanging emails. Evaluating the sender's intent just by words is quite arrogant if such electronic paralinguistic cues are not taken into account. So in the current research, besides detecting the linguistic content of the emails, the interface between the participants, the electronic paralinguistic cues and the pragmatic effects of the linguistic displays is also taken into consideration. The lesson to take away from the findings of this study is the need to take into account the role of emoticons as a future innovative communication system because of the prevalence dependency on CMC in today's society. CMC has formed the participants' language use. Regarding this, people influence and interact with technology and vice versa. Language education should be motivated to maintain a harmonious relationship with the dynamics and hybrid nature of

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CMC and in this respect, the present research has revealed the pedagogical potential for using email in EFL.

Reciprocal understanding is not guaranteed, despite the asynchronous nature of emails which allocates enough time and space for interactants to express their ideas. Meaning negotiation between participants using contextualized politeness strategies can be essential to the expanding of intercultural understanding in email communication. This research revealed that rather than a received, static concept, culture can be recognized as a process of meaning negotiation in email correspondence. It has also emphasized on the interface of speech acts, politeness and email. Thus, concerning the questions in this study, one can say that:

- 1) The meaning of politeness is depending on context; 2) The linguistic forms of speech act does not determine its intent; 3) Electronic paralinguistic features are used to help meaning negotiation. They are used to strengthen or weaken the tone of the writer; and 4) Intercultural understanding is (re)negotiated in interpersonal communication.

Based on the results of this study, intercultural communication via email which is enriched with its own contextualization cues, could make a new horizon in the studies of language, culture and education. Thus, a major improvement that would be welcomed in language education in future is the ability of email communication to be applied in this field.

Although this study has gained well- to- do data and a comprehensive data analysis has been managed, there are certainly limitations to this research which can be avoided in future similar studies. First, it was the matter of the length time of the study. Being too long could bother the participants and being too short could not be beneficial to explore the development of mutual understanding and interpersonal relationship between the interactants. The

second one was the sample size which made the results not generalizable to all situations in the intercultural communication by email but reflect certain typical ones. Regarding the qualitative research method, the number of the participants was limited. To offer a deep understanding of intercultural communication, further scholarly studies in line with this research can be conducted to include a larger number of participants.

The findings of this study might bear some implications. First, an important implication of this study is related to the concept of intercultural competence. In line with Kramsch (1998) who believes that the ability to create, recognize and respect a different culture is an index of intercultural competence, the researchers in this study also believe that this intercultural competence is learnt, shaped and developed through negotiations between interactants. So, meaning negotiation, exchange of knowledge and developing of a relationship can all serve the purpose of preparing a competent communicator.

In terms of pedagogical implications, it can be understood from the rich contextualized meaning in email intercultural communication that it could be a worthwhile resource for teaching language and culture. Acknowledging the challenge or support of their own assumptions about other cultures and possibly being more tolerant of the differences, interactants in real experience interactions construct interactive meaning which agrees with the main argument of this study that the meaning of politeness is negotiated by the participants in their interactions and coupled with those from Kramsch (1998) who also emphasizes the function of interactive meaning construction and Ma (1996) who points out the important role of email in motivating language learners to be actively engaged in meaning construction. Drawing upon the upshots of this study, it is suggested that email intercultural communication

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which could encourage more critical thinking about language and communication be considered into account in the language classroom curriculum in Iran. It can be accomplished by providing intercultural exchanges between an Iranian class and a class from the UK, the US or Canada pairing individual students with one another.

Additionally, it is proposed that the act of exchanging emails between teachers from the given groups could also be vital for that intercultural awareness is not just important for language learners alone, but is also essential for language teachers too. It can be asserted that teachers who want to teach culture should be armed with intercultural communication experiences.

Finally, the findings of this research seem to inspire other researchers to investigate the role of electronic paralinguistic features in intercultural communication.

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