A Comparison of High-Level vs. Low-Level Face-Threatening Acts in Native and Nonnative Institutional Discourse

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This paper reports on a large-scale quantitative investigation into a three different types of face-threatening act in authentic institutional discourse. The contrastive analysis is based on a substantial corpus of 600 native English, interlanguage (Dutch-) English and native Dutch business letters. In all, over 900 tokens of face-threatening acts are analyzed, covering both high-level face threats (in particular, offers and warnings) and low-level face-threats (in particular, apologies and expressions of thanks).

The analysis, which employs Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model, focuses on a two distinct but related research questions regarding variation:

1) Pragmatic Variation: How are face-threatening acts realized in written business discourse? In particular, to what extent do writers use lexical, syntactic and textual resources to mark (im)politeness, and to what extent do high-level FTAs differ systematically from low-level ones in terms of their surface realizations?
2) Interlanguage Variation: To what extent do native and interlanguage English realizations differ? Can such differences, partly or completely, be attributed to pragmatic transfer from the interlanguage users' L1 (in this case Dutch)? And, as a preliminary issue, to what extent do English and Dutch realizations differ in the first place?

The paper thus attempts to bridge the gap between three pragmatic subfields: politeness research, institutional discourse studies, and cross-cultural pragmatics.

Preliminary results suggests that there are indeed significant differences with regard to both dimensions. High-level FTAs result in the use of more indirectness markers (such as impersonal constructions and modal auxiliaries) and downgrading strategies, whereas low-level FTAs exhibit more directness, in particular through the use of performative expressions and upgraders. There is also evidence that interlanguage users transfer strategies employed in their native tongue (Dutch) to their IL English FTA realizations, resulting in a higher level of directness.