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## Language Games in Computer-Mediated Communication

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### Abstract

Drawn upon Wittgenstein's theory of language games, we propose a pragmatic perspective of organizational communication, which unites research in media richness, sense-making, and conversation analysis. We conducted a comparative study of face-to-face versus computer-mediated reference transactions in an academic library and found that communicative context impacts the way people use language, and people consciously utilize linguistic signals to create a communicative context, especially a context of politeness.

**Keywords:** Computer-Mediated Communication, Media Richness Theory, Language Games, Wittgenstein, Sense-Making, Conversation Analysis, Politeness, Linguistic Strategies

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# Language Games in Computer-Mediated Communication

To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life. (Wittgenstein, 1968)

## Introduction

It has been long recognized that communication is important to the manager's job (Mintzberg 1973). Recently businesses are increasingly investing in computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies, such as e-mail, Short Message Services (SMS) and web-enabled media in order to support managerial communications (Bernett, Masi, & Fischer, 2002). An influential theory to foster understanding of organizational communication is Daft and Lengel's (1984; Daft & Lengel, 1986) media richness theory; however both media richness theory and its alternatives fail to take into account the significance of language itself and have not looked systematically at the linguistic strategies that people use when engaged in communication. Sense making theorists (Lee, 1994; Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997) do go beyond the point of media choice to look at how people make sense of the CMC text within the same media, but they emphasize the receiver end of communication and focus on the semantic level of language. Traditional conversation analyses of communication tend to be done at a distance, and neglect the impact of media characteristics. We propose a pragmatic perspective of organizational communication, which unites research in media richness, sense-making, and conversation analysis with Wittgenstein's theory of language games (Wittgenstein, 1968). We conducted a comparative study of face-to-face versus computer-mediated reference transactions in an academic library. We found that communicative context impacts the way people use language, and people consciously utilize linguistic signals to create a communicative context, especially a context of politeness.

## Media Richness Theory

Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986) defines information richness as "the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval". Communication media vary in their ability to process rich information due to their capacity for "immediate feedback, the number of cues and channels utilized, personalization, and language variety" (Daft & Lengel, 1986). According to the theory, a synchronous text-based chat room will be considered lean because it is limited to a single linguistic channel: text; but it will be richer than email because of interactivity and immediacy. Regarding the characteristics of media as inherently determined, the theory has mainly served as a normative theory predicting how managers make communication choices, namely choosing media higher in richness for equivocal or ambiguous tasks.

While some empirical studies support the media richness model, others provide conflicting evidence (Fulk & Boyd, 1991; Schmitz & Fulk, 1991). The critics have argued that the perceptions of media are socially constructed. They argue that media perceptions and choice are influenced by norms, others' attitudes influence attitudes toward and use of new media, the need to send symbolic messages (Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987; M. Lynne Markus, 1994; Trevino, Webster, & Stein, 2000), the critical mass of users (M. Lynne Markus, 1987; M.

Lynne Markus, 1994), user's experience with the media, communication partner and organizational context (Carlson & Zmud, 1999; Yoo & Alavi, 2001; Zack & McKenney, 1995).

Because they rely on survey instrument, media richness theorists and their critics often fail to "address actual channel effects on communication behavior past the point of selection" (Walther, 1996) or the perception of the media. At best the critiques emphasize the interpretative flexibility of media perception or choice rather than the message itself. Nevertheless, both the media richness theory and its critics failed to examine the importance of language itself in communication.

### **Sense-making Theories**

A few interpretative-symbolic theorists do go beyond the point of media choice to look at how people make sense of the CMC text within the same media. Lee's (1994) and Ngwenyama et al.'s (1997) are based upon Markus' (1994) data and consisting of a few e-mail messages on a single issue. The authors consider communication interactants as active "intelligent being(s) in a shared social context who can transform whatever 'lean' words and cues he or she receives into an understanding of what the speaker or writer meant" either through the critical reflection (Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997) or hermeneutic circle (Lee, 1994). The texts often include documentary artifacts, people's behaviors, organizational contexts and social institutions. However, the authors seem to emphasize the "enactment of meaning" (Lee, 1994) at the receiver end of the communication without looking at how speakers could intelligently create the communicative context. Focusing on the semantic level of language, they also fail to examine how language is actually used across media.

### **Conversation Analysis**

However, a growing body of conversation analysis literature suggests that not only the language itself but also how it is used is critically important for the successful communications in organizations (Haberland & Mey, 2002; Pilegaard, 1997; Yeung, 1997). Communication in business settings consists of linguistic acts during which people describe facts, negotiate meanings, create commitment, perform transactions and so on. CMC systems are "linguistic communication systems only technically implemented" in the sense they provide "a means and environment for human communication", and theories of language hold significant implications for systems design (Hirschheim, Klein, & Lyytinen, 1995; Lyytinen, 1985). In order to design a CMC system, it is critical to understand human linguistic acts.

A major theory to understand communication is Brown and Levinson's (1987) universal theory of politeness. They regard communication as face threatening acts and interactants have to communicate politeness to maintain each other's "face" (Goffman, 1967) – "the "public self-image that every (competent adult) member (of a society) wants to claim for himself" (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The redressive strategies consist of "positive politeness" which attends to the other's positive face – his/her wants to be thought of as desirable, and "negative politeness" which redresses to the other's negative face – his/her freedom of action and freedom from imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

We consider politeness important for business communication. Business communication usually involves information seeking or goal achieving which are potential face-threatening acts for three reasons: 1) information seeking may indicate an element of ignorance or being indebted to the other's helping behavior; 2) asking information may sound prying and getting someone to do something imposing; and 3) the language used could convey the social distance and the relative power between the interactants. Therefore the ability to recognize and respect the other's face is central in business communication.

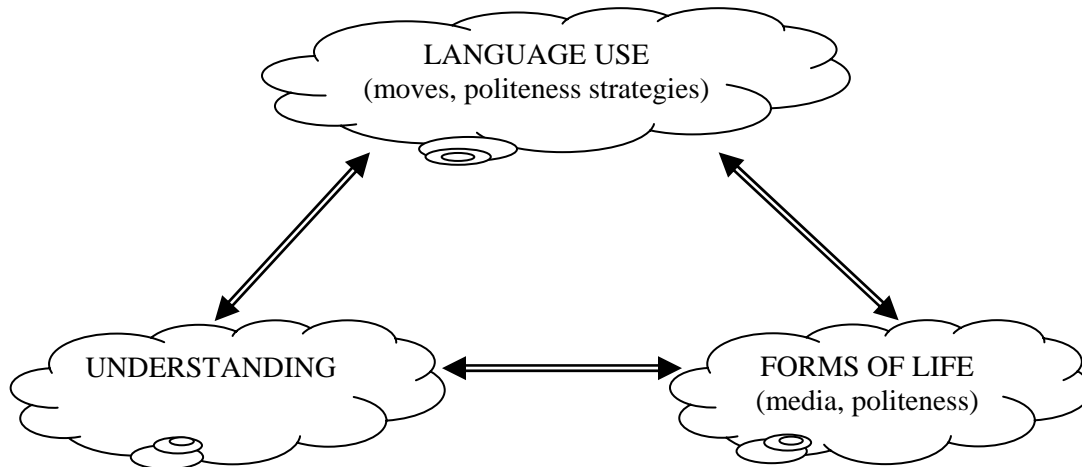
The universality of Levinson's theory has been empirically challenged in recent years (Fraser, 1990; Mao, 1994), and one of the alternatives is to exam Levinson's theory in a specific type of discourse (Kurzon, 2001), in this case, reference transactions. To our knowledge, there exist no comparative studies concerning politeness strategies across different media to date, even though several authors investigate written business correspondence (Pilegaard, 1997; Yeung, 1997) or telephone conversation (Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002). By capturing the interaction between media and language, this study could also contribute to the existing body of knowledge in pragmatics.

Orlikowski et al.'s (1994) investigates how people respond to community norms, task exigencies and media capabilities by drawing upon a rich "genre repertoire" consisting of memo, dialogue and ballot. Their study does partially rely upon the language structure to identify different types of genre; however, no attention is paid to how interactants' linguistic strategies dynamically shape and are shaped by the communicative context within a specific genre. In the following section, we are going to argue that Wittgenstein's theory of language games will bring these three streams of research together and that a comparative examination of linguistic strategies, especially the strategies of politeness, across media will shed light on the way people communicate.

### **Language Games: A Pragmatic Perspective of Communication**

Wittgenstein's pragmatic perspective of language denies the old tradition of perceiving language as reference to the object world. Instead, words are like "tools" or "instruments" with diverse functions that we can use for different purposes in different language games (Wittgenstein, 1968). The concept of language game suggests a dialectical unity of language use, form of life and understanding of the world (Apel, 1967, p.56).

"The speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (Wittgenstein, 1968). How we talk is imbedded in our "forms of life"-- those "patterns, in the fabric of human existence and activities on earth" (Pitkin, 1972): "Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing" (Wittgenstein, 1968). We learn new words or the new meaning of words by knowing how to do things, and by engaging in different "language games". For instance, a person who has never seen a mouse will have a hard time understanding browsing the Internet. Likewise, different languages also imply different ways of understanding the world, and different ways of practice in life-forms. "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein, 1921-2,5.6). For instance, a person who regards an online chat room as "a private salon" will speak differently than a person who regards it as "a public square".



**Figure 1. Language games in communication (CMC / face-to-face)**

Computer mediated business communication is a different form of life than a face-to-business communication and operates in a different context. Online communication eliminates social cues (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) and relies heavily on the use of written words. Unlike face-to-face communication in which interactants can access the “partly shared social world” (Rommetveit, 1974) enclosed in the same time and space, CMC interactants are emerged in their own context with the written messages as the main common resource between them. As a result, people use language and make sense of the situated game differently in different media. Whereas “mouthing” the words differs from “mousing” the words, thinking with the mouth is different from thinking with the mouse. Due to the lack of social cues, we suspect that people may attach greater importance to language use in CMC and that online interactants will consciously utilize linguistic signals to create a communicative context. Since natural languages are “primarily designed... for use in face-to-face interaction” (Levinson, 1983), predictably new linguistic conventions, and grammars will emerge in CMC. Speeches not appropriate in face-to-face interaction will be considered normal online. At the same time, the different use of language could create different context and impact interactants’ understanding of the world differently: The perceived impersonal characteristics of CMC could be the outcome of different politeness strategies; the same politeness strategy which is common in face-to-face situation may strike people as absurd online.

Whereas media richness theorists argue that the context that can be created by use of a media is defined in advance, Levinson insists on the universality of their theory of politeness. By contrast, Wittgenstein would argue that context is part of form of life, and it is constructed by reflexive interactants “on the fly” in situated language games (Boland, 1996). Genre and politeness are ways to play the game; and they are both the medium and outcome of human interactions. However, linguistic strategies should be investigated turn by turn, which could strengthen the theory of genre (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994) and the theory of politeness by adding a dynamic quality.

Therefore, we entered the field with one general research question:

*How do language use, communicative context (media richness/politeness), and understanding of the world shape and are shaped by each other?*

## Method

### Research Setting

The data was gathered from the observations of reference interviews at a major private university (which is referred to as the Library thereafter). To address the decreasing usage of the reference desk during the past few years, the management at the Library elected to adopt LivePerson Service Edition, an interactive online chat software, whose more advanced enterprise editions enjoyed more than 3000 companies including eBay and Bell Canada. The official rollout started from the fall of 2001, and the usage didn't actually pick up until the spring of 2002. The library usage was normally very low during the summer. As a result, we elected to enter the field in the fall of 2002.

The software offers several convenient features: (1) *editable canned responses*: Librarians can use preprogrammed messages stored in the canned response database to reduce response time; (2) *spell check and text box formatting*: Librarians can spell check and format their responses in real time; (3) *audio alert*: different sounds of a ringing bell will ring to notify the librarian that a client is either entering the site or actually requesting a chat. An automatic message appears to ask the client to wait if the librarian is engaged with someone else. (4) *multiple chats*: Librarians can conduct as many chats simultaneously as the administrator allows; (5) *site monitoring*: librarians can view, in real-time, clients' website activity and communication history; and (6) *offline Email response*: When librarians are off duty, the Email mode allows clients to send questions electronically.

While librarians performed their regular reference work at the reference desk in the lobby of the library, they conducted online reference from their own offices, from 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm weekdays.

**Data.** Data was collected by the first author in the field during a period of three months, normally two days a week, except for two weeks when only the face-to-face interviews were observed, due to technical problems with LivePerson. Initial interviews were conducted with each librarian, asking about their perception and experience with LivePerson and their daily practice. The first author sat in the librarian's office or behind the reference desk observing the transactions. After each face-to-face reference transaction, an immediate post-session interview was conducted with the librarian and the client. Since it was not possible to interview online clients immediately, a face-to-face interview was arranged within two days to eliminate the recall bias. Two clients were interviewed via telephone due to the difficulty of travel or scheduling. The first author also attended reference meetings. The two authors met once a week to analyze raw data through an iterative and progressive theme building and categorization. Data collection ended when new cases did not give substantive new information (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), which resulted in 12 usable chat observations, 12 face-to-face observations, 12 interviews with the clients, 16 interviews with the librarians and related documentations and reference meeting minutes. Twenty-four clients and five librarians participated in the study.

|               | Chat | f-t-f |
|---------------|------|-------|
| PhD           | 4    | 2     |
| Graduate      | 6    | 5     |
| Undergraduate | 1    | 4     |
| Community     | 1    | 1     |
| Total         | 12   | 12    |

**Table 1. Clients by Education**

|        | Chat | f-t-f |
|--------|------|-------|
| Male   | 8    | 7     |
| Female | 4    | 5     |
| Total  | 12   | 12    |

**Table 2. Clients by Gender**

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| Male   | 1 |
| Female | 4 |
| Total  | 5 |

**Table 3. Librarians by Gender**

### Analysis

We have two levels of analysis. The concept of “episode” is used to analyze the conversation structures. An episode consists of “opening” (librarian’s offering, self presentations), “goal”, “clarification/providing help”, and “conclusion”. Clarification and providing help are lumped to form the 3<sup>rd</sup> step, because the reference transaction is an iterative trial-and-error process, and many times it is during the process of providing the help that librarians come to clarify what clients really want. The client states what he/she wants in the stage called “goal”. “Conclusion” is often signaled by the adjacent pair of gratitude expressions such as “Thank you” and “You are welcome” or the departure of the client. We collected 15 online episodes and 16 face-to-face episodes.

The concept of “move” is used when analyzing the level of politeness. Move refers to “any full stretch of talk or of its substitutes which has a distinctive unity bearing on some set or other of the circumstances in which participants find themselves (some “game” or other in the peculiar sense employed by Wittgenstein)” (Goffman, 1981, p.24). A move signals a shift in topics or emphasis. The coherence or order in conversation lies at the level of “interactional moves”, not at the level of sentences in isolation (Levinson, 1983). As a result, a move could be composed of several sentences. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) category of politeness strategies (Appendix A) is used.

### Results

All interactants indicated an awareness of the leanness of CMC; however, online interactants showed a much more heightened awareness of language than their face-to-face counterparts. Most of the interactants of online transactions mentioned the importance of language, especially the importance of politeness. For them, language is “a most critical tool” that should not be “trashed”(client interview with Ann, p.6). By comparison, none of the face-to-face clients ever mentioned the use of language during the interviews.

### Language Creates Contexts and Impacts Understanding

Our data lends support to Wittgenstein’s view that language precedes forms of life. The 11 different words for basic color enable an English speaker see more shades of color in the world than New Guinea natives do who have only “light” and “dark” for basic colors in their language (Clark, 1996, p.341). Likewise, the meanings of words helped interactants in creating communicative contexts and making sensing of the online and face-to-face transactions.



**Virtual vs. Material.** For the librarians the word “online reference” meant fast answers, and they made a conscious decision earlier on not to answer involved research questions. They always asked the client to come in or call if the questions were too complicated. In an extreme case, librarian Mary<sup>2</sup> felt frustrated because she could not find the answers online. However, she decided not to check print sources, because

“To me, chat should be quick and I couldn’t do it quickly enough. ... And I felt that I really should have gone to the reference desk to look that up. But that is not the purpose of the chat. So I thought that just by telling him there will be things in the library that would be ok.”  
(librarian interview with Mary, p.2, italic added)

As a result, Mary did not want to violate the rules of the context that were delineated by the words “online reference”. Interestingly, eight out of twelve online clients did not expect the librarian to check print sources neither. When the librarian did go to check print sources or consult another expert, the client was “almost astounded... beyond expectation” (client interview with David, p.7). This finding complements Robey et al’s (2002) view that material work and virtual work are intertwined in the forms of reinforcement, complementarity, synergy and reciprocity. Sometimes people arbitrarily separate physical context from virtual context and resist crossing the borders.

**Man vs. machine.** Seven of the twelve online clients said that they did not have an image of the librarian when they were chatting online; while six out of them thought the librarian was at a call center or in a cubicle. This may confirm the earlier studies that CMC is a depersonalized cool medium (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Walther, 1996). Another possible reason may be that the canned greeting was worded as “Please wait for a site operator to respond” (italic added): a site operator could be either a human or a machine.

**Jane Mattson.** Sometimes librarians had to transfer a request to another librarian who has the special knowledge of the field. Each time they referred to the other librarian by full name either in face-to-face or online. However, the interviews revealed that only online clients showed sensitivity to this linguistic practice.

“She clearly believed that Jane Mattson is the authority. I think that is the reason that she gave the name, because she believed it. People drop names when they want to make a point. I know so and so, I know the president. If she did not think that this person wasn’t important to contact, or she wasn’t knowledgeable. If this person is similar to her and maybe knows one more piece of knowledge than her, she wouldn’t drop her name. By dropping her name, she means that this lady not only knows this information but she knows a lot more than she does.”  
(client interview with David, p.9)

A post-session interview with the librarian also confirmed that she regarded Jane Mattson as the authority.

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<sup>2</sup> The names of the librarians and clients are disguised.

### Communicative Contexts Shape Language Use and Understanding

A close comparison of the online and face-to-face transcripts indicates different “grammars” across face-to-face and online context. The online interactants relied on different linguistic strategies to overcome the lack of social cues: using presence inquiry, breaking sentences into small chunks, and using process report.

**Presence inquiry.** Three out of the 15 online episodes ended abruptly where the client either left for a meeting or went to browse the website recommended by the librarian without returning. By contrast all the face-to-face episodes were concluded by the adjacent pair of gratitude expressions such as “Thank you” and “You are welcome”. Since all the online clients were multitasking while chatting, either at home or in their office, it was predictable that this kind of disappearance happened. During the two weeks of technical break down of the software, many times, clients were knocked out of the system without warning, leaving the librarian wondering where the clients had gone. As a result, librarians sent out such messages “Are you still there?” Librarian Barbara didn’t seem to be bothered by her client’s sudden disappearance because, in her words, “this is the nature of being”, or, the nature of digital being. However, for some other librarians, this heightened the sense of lack of closure in online transactions. As one librarian said:

“I am not happy that he just got off. Because I didn’t get to find out whether Investext the report I recommended actually had that kind of data. I would like to have him say ‘oh, yeah I see it’, or give me his name and email so I can follow up and say “is that what you wanted?” ... It is frustrating that you can’t control it all, they are just gone, [Laugh.] and you have no idea what happened.”

(librarian interview with Brenda, p.4)

**A little at a time.** All librarians and half of the clients also learned to send information in small chunks, because there was heightened time pressure online and typing was much slower than talking. This helps to buy some time, or create a feel of real time dialogue.

“No, it is a conscious decision to send something. ... I know it is easier for people to digest. Well, it is easier for people to get a little piece of information to make it feel like it is a continuous conversation. If you just send them like four sentences in a block in two minutes, it really disrupts the flow of the conversation. So I just got this habit of splitting up larger comment or sentence into two or three sentences, to give the conversation a more dynamic feel.”

(client interview with Jeremy, p. 6, italic added)

“I think I did that [breaking the message into two pieces] so she could have it a little bit, she read it, so I could have a couple of minutes to write something else. She could do something while I am typing. Also she could see if I am with her or not.”

(client interview with Linda, p.3, italic added)

**I’m getting there.** Realizing that an online client couldn’t see them working and therefore grew impatient, librarians also sent out progress report messages such as: “I’m getting closer to some answers,” or “I’m still checking”. Clients interviewed also confirmed that this strategy served the purpose very well. Obviously, in face-to-face, such utterances would strike people as absurd and unnecessary under most circumstances.

## A Close Look at Politeness

**Politeness strategies.** The data (table 4) seemed to support Levinson's view that interactants used both positive and negative strategies in both CMC and face-to-face communication. In the face-to-face situation, while the librarians used both types of strategies fairly equally (40.35% vs. 59.69%), the clients mainly resorted to the negative strategies (37.78% vs. 63.64%). This could be explained by the fact that the clients were engaged in a potentially face threatening act, namely information seeking. It was natural for them to refrain from sounding too imposing or demanding. While the librarians also needed to use some negative strategies because they were also involved in information seeking when trying to clarify what the client wanted.

The most dramatic change occurred when the librarians moved from a face-to-face to a CMC reference transaction, the negative strategies seemed to take predominance over the positive ones (from 59.65% to 82.80%). If not counting the usual politeness marker "thank you", the decrease of positive strategies was even more salient (from 39.47% to 9.68%). Our interviews indicated that the librarians were fully aware of the limitations of the restricted medium and consciously decided to take the questions asked "at face value" in Robin's words (p.6), and less likely to engage in extensive rapport building positive strategies. The increase in online use of "Thank you" markers was because their meanings were clear and not prone to misinterpretation.

|   | Face-to-face |          |          |          | Chat      |          |          |          |
|---|--------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
|   | Librarian    |          | Client   |          | Librarian |          | Client   |          |
|   | Positive     | Negative | Positive | Negative | Positive  | Negative | Positive | Negative |
| All   | 46           | 68       | 17       | 28       | 16        | 77       | 30       | 31       |
| Non " thank you"  | 45           |          | 11       |          | 9         |          | 13       |          |
| Thank you   | 1            |          | 6        |          | 7         |          | 17       |          |
| <b>% of the total strategies used by the same party</b> |              |          |          |          |           |          |          |          |
| All   | 40.35%       | 59.65%   | 37.78%   | 63.64%   | 17.20%    | 82.80%   | 49.18%   | 50.82%   |
| Non " thank you"  | 39.47%       |          | 24.44%   |          | 9.68%     |          | 21.31%   |          |
| Thank you   | 0.88%        |          | 13.33%   |          | 7.53%     |          | 27.87%   |          |

**Table 4. Composition of Politeness Strategies**

**We vs. I.** Another strategy that seemed to differ across media was the positive strategy 7 ("the point-of-view"). In all communication contexts, the normal unmarked deictic center is the one where the speaker is the central person and the place where the speaker is at is the central place (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Since the interactants are geographically dispersed in online transactions, the unmarked deictic center functions differently than in fact-to-face, providing different anchorage point for mapping politeness strategies. In face-to-face, the positive strategy 7 usually took on various forms of merging the "I" and the "you" into an inclusive "we", in order to raise common ground or sympathy. Typical utterances included: "[P7] Let's look at this one"

(observation: Mary\_Peter), “[P7] And we looked” (observation: Robin\_Dennis)<sup>3</sup>. By contrast, the only strategy 7 online was standing in the other’s shoes. For instance, librarian Joyce spoke as if she was the client Matt, when suggesting him to call someone else: “[P7] I would call them”, she said.

**Linguistic dances.** The interactants were also engaged consciously in linguistic dances: attuning to the other’s way of speech and manipulating language to change the communicative context. Let’s take one exemplary online episode (see Appendix B) where the librarian Joyce helped Jeremy with his question about the loan policy. Joyce opened the conversation by using a mix of both positive and negative politeness policy:

*Joyce at Library: [P2]Great! [N2]How can I help you?<sup>4</sup>*

*(chat transcript with Joyce\_Jeremy)*

Then Jeremy properly explained his request, sending in small chunks. And the ellipses successfully conveyed to Joyce that the sentence was not complete yet. “That’s why I waited”, Joyce said later in the interview.

*Visitor: I am a grad student here at University.*

*Visitor: I came 3 weeks ago, and one of the things I was told at the desk is that there is a way for grad students to keep books for a semester...*

*Visitor: if they need them for their research.*

*(chat transcript with Joyce\_Jeremy)*

In response to the question, Joyce answered:

*Joyce at Library: [N7]The circulation department handles that type of request. Their phone number is 222-2506.*

*(chat transcript with Joyce\_Jeremy)*

She deployed the negative strategy 7 (impersonalize speaker): disassociating herself from the potential infringement on Jeremy if she sounded as if she was demanding him to go to another department for help. However, this seemed to have an unfavorable impact on Jeremy, who later disclosed that her lack of personal reference to him in such a matter-of-fact instruction, plus her properly capitalized and punctuated writing drastically increased his perception of social distance and formality. (All the canned messages were grammatically perfect.) In order to drop the formality level and raise common ground, he consciously used three positive strategies in his response: “thank you” marker (positive strategy 1), an emotional icon (positive strategy 12), and small talk (positive strategy 7):

*Visitor: [P1]thank you very much [P12]:-) [P7]I was going to call but I couldn’t resist the chance to try the on-line chat first.*

*(chat transcript with Joyce\_Jeremy)*

<sup>3</sup> [P7] denotes positive politeness strategy 7. See appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> [P2] denotes positive politeness strategy 2; [N2] denotes negative politeness strategy 2. See appendix A. Chat transcripts and face-to-face observations are in italics, while interviews are in normal font..

“I consciously did this: ... an attempt to try to lower the formality of conversation. It was getting a little too formal for me. ... It is a common act for me, the Internet things, to print a smiley face, or exclamation points or something extra, when I feel the conversation is too much about words not about your actual interaction. It makes it more human this way when I talk to people like that.”  
(client interview with Jeremy, p.6)

Shortly after Jeremy’s attempt, Joyce did not capitalize the first letter of her sentence, for the very first time: a sign of informality. Also she employed the negative strategy 7 (Impersonalize hearer), a performative that disassociated Jeremy from the act requested upon him thereby minimizing imposition. Jeremy’s maneuver worked.

*Joyce at Library:* <sup>[N7]</sup>scroll down to loan periods and renewals – there’s paragraph covering graduate student privileges.  
(chat transcript with Joyce\_ Jeremy)

Also Joyce’s positive strategy of politeness by offering the compliment “great” seemed to backfire too, because of the formality level that had already been created by her proper writing. Jeremy felt that she overused “great” and the second “great” sounded “contrived”.

“... When I saw the second ‘great’, I was thinking ‘is she just randomly tossing ‘great’ every so often?’ ... The first ‘great’ seemed natural, the second ‘great’ seemed forced. Then I looked at the first ‘great’ and thought that was forced [too].”  
(client interview with Jeremy, p.9)

This confirms the accumulation effect in CMC: the documentation function of online chat amplified the memories trace of the first ‘great’ and the second ‘great’ took on different meaning. Jeremy did indicate that a similar use of ‘great’ face-to-face would not bother him.

In a similar episode, David was engaged in a linguistic dance with the librarian where he tried to match the librarian’s style instead of attempting to influence the librarian.

“I tend to write informally in the Chat. ... Look at my first start. There is no capital there. I just capitalized “I”. No punctuation ending. All lower case. This one I did more formal. I was doing more formal because she keeps writing formal. ... I tried to keep away from it but I kept falling back to the informal pattern.”  
(client interview with David, p.9)

Let’s look at another exemplary face-to-face episode (see Appendix C) where the librarian Robin helped Dennis a MBA student to find out about information on drive-in theatres. Since this is a long episode, we will only look at the last portion of it. After flipping through the Encyclopedia together without much luck, Dennis suggested to look at the section under “Drive-in movie theatres”. He used two positive strategies: an ellipsis to indicate shared knowledge (positive strategy 4), and a tag “you thought?” (positive strategy 3) to intensify interest from the librarian.

*Client:* [Reading from the assignment sheet.] <sup>[P4]</sup>Drive-in movie theatres. / Anything in there, <sup>[P3]</sup>you thought?<sup>5</sup>  
(face-to-face observation with Robin\_ Dennis)

<sup>5</sup> A “/” denotes a pause.

Instead of rejecting Dennis's suggestion flat, Robin suggested a broader term politely. The use of "hedge" (guessing, or something like that) modified the force of his claim to truth or correctness (negative strategy 2). He also using a tag "wouldn't you think?" to intensify the client's interest in his suggested action (positive strategy 3).

*Robin: Yeah, <sup>[N2]</sup>I am guessing that it is going to be theatres more broadly. It should be like a theatre owner associations <sup>[N2]</sup>or something like that, <sup>[P3]</sup>wouldn't you think?*  
(face-to-face observation with Robin\_Dennis)

Then Robin initiated a joke (positive strategy 8).

*Robin: [Reading from the book]. <sup>[P8]</sup>Blue Berry Award. That's funny. [Both laugh.]*  
*Robin: How about film? Film industry? Here's American Film Marketing Association.*  
(face-to-face observation with Robin\_Dennis)

Robin initiated another joke (positive strategy 8) to liven up the atmosphere, when he delivered the bad news to the client that the chance of finding the much needed information might be slim. To signal the solidarity, he also used "we" (positive strategy 12).

*Client: Anything else you can think of?*  
*Robin: No. <sup>[P8]</sup>Easy answer to your question "No". [Laugh].*  
*Client: Have you ever seen that?*  
*Robin: Yeah, especially for this kind of opportunity, some of the questions you are not going to find any. <sup>[P12]</sup>And we looked. <sup>[N7]</sup>But do go over to Business and Industry database.*  
(face-to-face observation with Robin\_Dennis)

When suggesting Dennis to use another database, Robin also employed the negative strategy 7 (Impersonalize hearer), a performative that disassociated Dennis from the act requested upon him thereby minimizing imposition.

Finally, Robin deployed the positive strategy of standing in the other's shoes when suggesting Dennis to try "Drive-in" first. Please note that the negative strategy 4 was used to minimize the imposition of the suggestion twice, and a performative was used to disassociate Dennis from the requested action (negative strategy 7).

*Client: Ok. I go over there. [Pointing to the computer across the aisle]. Where should I go?*  
*Bill: Research Databases, Business, and then Business and Industry Databases and whatever you want. [Client is writing down the instruction] <sup>[P7]</sup>I'll <sup>[N4]</sup>just try "Drive-in" first. <sup>[N4]</sup>Just <sup>[P7]</sup>make it real broad. Then you will see millions of ads for the movies.*  
(face-to-face observation with Robin\_Dennis)

Then the episode ended with a positive "thank you" marker.

*Client: OK, <sup>[P1]</sup>thanks.*  
*Bill: uh-humm.*  
(face-to-face observation with Robin\_Dennis)

These two episodes reveal that librarians used more positive strategies in face-to-face situation than online. During the follow-up interviews after the face-to-face episode, neither the librarian nor client ever mentioned the use of language itself. This indicates that they were less

conscious of the impact of language use than their chat-room counterparts. They deployed the politeness strategies without knowing it. In Wittgenstein's words, the strategies are so "trivial" because they are "in front of you". While in CMC their awareness of language use is heightened. They are like "barbarians" challenged by strange forms of life (Apel, 1967, p.51), which offers the chance of looking at their old way of using language from a different perspective.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The pragmatic examination of business communication reveals that CMC is a different form of life than a face-to-face communication, creating different contexts for the communication. Communicative contexts shape the way language is used, resulting in emerging new grammars of CMC. In response to the limited channel capabilities, interactants in CMC are more aware of the significance of language in communication and actively utilize linguistic signals to create a communicative context conducive to business transactions.

The theoretical implications of this study are threefold. First, the pragmatic perspective provides an alternative way of thinking about the media richness, by looking beyond the point of interpretative flexibility of media perception and choice. Media (as part of the context), language use and understanding of the world are dynamically intertwined. In response to media capabilities, people engaged in different language uses which in turn create different communicative contexts. The use of negative politeness strategies as a "social brake" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.130) could cause the perceived impersonal characteristics of CMC, whereas interactants could consciously utilize positive politeness strategies as a "social accelerator" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.103) to make CMC more pleasant. Second, this is consistent with structuration theorists (Giddens, 1986) who argue that people actively enact the social structures which in turn constrain their acts. Like Pentland's (1992) "organizing moves", linguistic strategies connect the actions and structures, and may help addressing the difficulty of operationalizing Giddens's theory (Rose & Scheepers, 2001). Third, this perspective also sheds light on business communication as a face-threatening linguistic act. Brown and Levinson's universal theory of politeness holds true only in the sense that both face-to-face and CMC interactants engage in both positive and negative strategies. However, the actual deployment of the strategies changes across different media.

This study has several limitations. First, this study employs a case study design therefore inherits its methodological limitations. However, the use of particular cases is faithful to Wittgenstein's method of grammatical investigation (Savickey, 2002), which elucidates the complexity and diversity of our use of language. Second, the presence of the researcher inevitably altered the communicative contexts. Third, the study did not look at other contextual variables such as personal attributes. Fourth, the study was restricted to a one-time interaction between people with minimum group history. Future research could employ a bigger sample to increase the variance of personal attributes, or a longitudinal design to examine how new grammars emerge and persist over time.

Despite these limitations, the findings have several implications for organization and systems design. First, to create a seamless integration of material and virtual work, a CMC system should be embedded in the natural working environment, as in this case providing chat reference at the front desk where librarians could easily assess print reference materials. Second,

when limited to a restricted electronic communication technology, managers should pay keener attention to linguistic strategies for creating proper communicative contexts for business transactions. Third, this study also has some implications for systems design. New standards could be established to address the issue of “closure” within the CMC context, such as the goodbye function and the dynamic update message capability in MSN Messenger (i.e. Person X is typing a message)<sup>6</sup>; a picture of a person smiling could serve as a good social accelerator for CMC.

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<sup>6</sup> We would like to thank one anonymous reviewer for bringing the third point to our attention.



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**Appendix A:**  
**Simplified Version of Brown and Levinson's Charts of Redressive Politeness Strategies**

| <b>Positive Politeness</b>                                |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Purposes</b>   |  | <b>Strategies</b>   |
| Claim 'common ground'                                     | Convey 'X is admirable, interesting                                  | 1. Notice, attend to it<br>2. Exaggerate<br>3. Intensify interest to H  |
|   | Claim in-group membership with H                                     | 4. Use in-group identity markers<br>5. Seek agreement   |
|   | Claim common point of view, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, empathy  | 6. Avoid disagreement<br>7. Presuppose/raise/assert common ground<br>8. Joke  |
| Convey that S and H are cooperators                       | Indicate S knows H's wants and is taking them into account           | 9. Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants  |
|   | Claim reflexivity  | 10. Offer, promise<br>11. Be optimistic<br>12. Include both S and H in the activity<br>13. Give (or ask for) reason |
|   | Claim reciprocity  | 14. Assume or assert reciprocity  |
| Fulfill H's want (for some X)                             |  | 15. Give gifts for H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)  |
| <b>Negative Politeness</b>                                |  |   |
| Don't presume/assume<br>Don't coerce                      | Make minimal assumptions about H's wants<br>Give H option not to act | 1. Be conventionally indirect<br>2. Question, hedge<br>3. Be pessimistic  |
|   | Minimize threat  | 4. Minimize the imposition<br>5. Give deference   |
| Communicate S's want not to impinge on H                  |  | 6. Apologize  |
|   | Dissociate S. H from the particular infringement                     | 7. Impersonalize S and H<br>8. State the FTA as a general rule<br>9. Nominalize                                     |
| Redress other wants of H's, derivative from negative face |  | 10. Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H   |

## Appendix B: Chat Transcript

*Librarian: Joyce*

*Client: Jeremy, male, PhD student*

*Want: library borrowing policy for graduate students*

info: Please wait for a site operator to respond.

info: You are now chatting with 'Joyce at Library'

[consent form transmitted.]

Joyce at Library: **Great!** How can I help you?

[/////: Joyce felt a time lag here]

Visitor: I am a grad student here at University.

Visitor: I came 3 weeks ago, and one of the things I was told at the desk is that there is a way for grad students to keep books for a semester...

Visitor: if they need them for their research.

Joyce at Library: The circulation department handles that type of request. Their phone number is 222-2506.

Visitor: I understand it's a letter or some sort—can you tell me the details?

Visitor: (i.e. letter's required)

Visitor: thank you very much :-) I was going to call but I couldn't resist the chance to try the on-line chat first.

Joyce at Library: Hold on while I check.

Joyce at Library: I am sending you a web page that should help you. When it appears on your screen your chat window may disappear. Just click on the chat box at the bottom of the screen and it should reappear.

Joyce at Library: <http://www.abc.edu/UI/Service/circpol.htm>

Visitor: sure

Joyce at Library: **scroll down to loan periods and renewals – there's paragraph covering graduate student privileges.**

Joyce at Library: Does that answer your questions?

Visitor: excellent, thank you.

Joyce at Library: **Great!** Do you mind providing an email address or phone number that Jessica can contact you at a later time?

Visitor: no problem. Jessica, I'm ww@abc.edu.

Joyce at Library: Thank you! Do you have any other questions?

Visitor: no

Joyce at Library: Thank you for using our chat service. Good-bye.

info: Chat session has been terminated by the site operator.

*(bold added)*

### Appendix C: Face-to-Face Transcript

*Librarian: Robin*

*Client: Dennis, male, MBA student*

*Want: Information on drive-in theatres*

*Time: October 3, 2002, Thursday*

*Place: Reference desk*

[Client approaching the reference desk, showing Robin an assignment sheet.]

Client: I am looking for trade associations...

Robin: [Reading the assignment sheet.] There are two things you can do. I'd like to suggest. So you are talking about movie?

Client: Drive-in movie theatres.

Robin: I would go to the Encyclopedia of Associations first. (OK.) To see if you can find some trade associations related to that. (OK) You may not get that specific answer. It may cover movie theatres in general(OK) , I don't know, but you can look. Because this will give you the name of the trade association, I will tell you, say, the publisher of a journal.

Client: If I find the journal, from there you can help me locate or

Robin: Yeah, you are not going to find it here in the library. At least you know there is a journal. (OK) Then you can search Business and Industry databases. You've been in that before.

Client: But I cannot recall where it was though. But I recall it was a research database. I went to Research Databases and then Business. (OK).

Robin: And then, (yeah) and then you can just search by key word in there (OK) or going by each issue, however you feel like doing it. [Referring to the encyclopedia.]

Client: Alright.

Robin: So that's where all the stuff is.

Client: So it was all back there?

Robin: Yeah.

Client: What about the result of

Robin: Let's look at it first. Two trade associations by location.

Client: Two trade journals and two trade associations

Robin: Yeah, I will do this one first, because that will list if the trade group published something, sort of give you a lead. (OK.) //// Because what you are going to find in Business and Industry databases, they are going to talk about this kind of stuff.

Client: OK. Let's get the book back there. [Pointing to the desk behind.]

Robin: Yeah. There's a key word index in the back. (OK) Just get as closest as you can, and then once you've done that, it will also give you a better idea what is out there. Then go into the Business and Industry Databases and go by key word.

Client: Can I by industry code I've known?

Robin: You can. But I might suggest trying by key words.

Client: Key words. OK, alright. Thanks.

Robin: Uh-hum.

[Two look at the Encyclopedia together.]

Client: [Reading from the index.] Drive-in movie theatres. / Anything in there, you thought?

Robin: Yeah, I am guessing that it is going to be theatres more broadly. It should be like a theatre owner associations or something like that, wouldn't you think?

Client: [Reading from the book.] Blue Berry Award. That's funny. [Both laugh.]  
 Robin: How about film? Film industry? Here's American Film Marketing Association.

[They could not find exactly what they wanted.]

///

Client: Anything else you can think of?

Robin: No. Easy answer to your question "No". [Laugh.]

Client: Have you ever seen that?

Robin: Yeah, especially for this kind of opportunity, some of the questions you are not going to find any. And we looked. But do go over to Business and Industry database.

Client: Ok. I go over there. [Pointing to the computer across the aisle.] Where should I go?

Robin: Research Databases, Business, and then Business and Industry Databases and whatever you want. [Client is writing down the instruction.] I'll just try "Drive-in" first. Just make it real broad. Then you will see millions of ads for the movies

Client: OK, thanks.

Robin: uh-humm.

*(bold added)*

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