

## **The Use of Politeness Strategies in Business letters Written by Native Speakers of English**

Catherine Nickerson  
*University of Nijmegen*

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### **1. Introduction**

This paper describes a study investigating the use of politeness strategies in a corpus of business letters written by native speakers of (British) English. It uses the model of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978), and makes particular reference to the linguistic realisations of positive and negative politeness strategies. The aim of the study was to gain a greater understanding of how the relationship between the Sender and the Receiver affects the rhetoric used within the letter. It focusses on the Sender's mitigation of threats to the Receiver's face, and seeks to offer suggestions as to which strategies are appropriate for use in British English business letters.

The paper begins with a description of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness strategies, including how this may be applied to business correspondence. Details are then given of the methodology followed in categorising the data, and the final section is a description and discussion of the various politeness strategies which could be identified.

### **2. Politeness Universals**

The model of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson uses Goffman's concept of **face**, defined as "something that is emotionally invested and that can be lost, maintained or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction", and which they suggest that, "all competent members of a society have (and know each other to have)" (Goffman 1976, quoted in Brown & Levinson 1978: 66). Face can be seen as consisting of two aspects: positive face and negative face. **Positive face** is "the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' claimed by the interactants", and involves the need to be accepted and to belong. **Negative face** is "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction....", and involves the desire to act freely and independently.

Brown and Levinson suggest that certain kinds of interactive acts intrinsically threaten the addressee's and/or speaker's face. For example, a Speaker's positive face is threatened by acts such as making apologies or accepting responsibility and his or her negative face is threatened, for instance, by making excuses and expressing thanks. For an Addressee, positive face is threatened by receiving criticisms or complaints, or by inappropriate forms of address etc., and negative face by receiving orders, suggestions and requests etc. In a business letter, the Speaker becomes the Sender of the letter and their Addressee becomes the Receiver. It is not difficult to see the potential for Face Threatening Acts (FTA's) in business correspondence, since many of the FTA's Brown and Levinson describe commonly occur, e.g. requests, complaints and suggestions. Much of what a Sender includes within a business letter, therefore, can be interpreted as mitigations of FTA's; the Sender may for instance preface a complaint or criticism (a negative FTA) with a compliment, the Brown and Levinson positive mitigation strategy of 'giving gifts to the Hearer'.

The seriousness of the FTA is determined by the interaction of three variables: the social distance between the participants, i.e. how well they know each other; the relative difference in power between them, which is created by their institutional roles; and the ranking of the imposition in the particular culture. The greater the social distance, relative power distance or ranking of the imposition, the greater the seriousness of the FTA. These variables may be expressed in business communication in a variety of different ways. For example, the need for mitigation is likely to be greater in a letter initiating contact than in a letter from the same Sender to the same Receiver once they are frequently in contact, since the social distance between them will have changed. Similarly, a Sender is more likely to use mitigation in writing to a client rather than as a client, since their institutional role places them in a less powerful position in the first case than in the second. Finally, the Sender is more likely to use mitigation in a reply to a complaint than in a letter (to the same Receiver) confirming an appointment, since the third variable, the ranking of the imposition, will be higher in the first letter than in the second. The language used in business correspondence may, therefore, be expected to reflect both the relationship between the Sender and the Receiver and the subject matter of the letter.

There are a number of options open to a Speaker/Sender when confronted with the necessity to make an FTA. If a Sender decides to make a Face Threatening Act, he or she may do so **baldly**, with no concession to face, **off record**, (or indirectly) where the FTA is made only by implication, or **on record**, with appropriate mitigation of the positive and/or negative threats to face. **Off record** strategies described by Brown and Levinson include 'giving hints', 'understating', 'using contradictions' etc.; **on record positive mitigation strategies** include 'claiming common ground', 'making offers', 'avoiding disagreement' etc., and **on record negative mitigation strategies** include 'apologising', 'giving deference' and

'being pessimistic'. A further option, when the Speaker considers that the FTA is too great and therefore cannot be mitigated, is simply to avoid making the FTA at all, (see Myers (1989) for further discussion of FTA avoidance in scientific writing).

The need to make FTA's in business correspondence would suggest the occurrence of one or more of these options, in particular of **on record positive** and **negative mitigation strategies**. Maier (1992) used elicited data and compared the politeness strategies occurring in business letters written by native and non-native English speakers. She identifies the following strategies described by Brown and Levinson as occurring most frequently in the letters she examined:

#### Negative Politeness Strategies

- 1 Apologise
  - 1a. Admit the impingement
  - 1b. Give overwhelming reasons
- 2 Go on record as incurring a debt
- 3 Be pessimistic
- 4 Be indirect
- 5 Give deference

#### Positive Politeness Strategies

1. Show interest
2. Offer a contribution or a benefit
3. Be optimistic

(Maier 1992: 194)

She found that although the non-native speakers were able to use politeness strategies, they used fewer negative strategies, such as expressions of gratitude, e.g. "I would very much appreciate" (1992: 198), and relied more heavily on positive strategies, such as showing interest, e.g. "I am very interested in your company. Working in ABC Corporation is my dream... I cannot give up my dream" (1992: 200). The present study looks in detail at authentic business discourse rather than elicited data, and seeks to establish what the appropriate use of politeness strategies for British writers is in a variety of communicative acts within business correspondence.

### 3. Methodology

A corpus of 82 business letters was collected over a period of four months. These were short and non-technical letters written by employees of multi-national companies and large non-commercial organisations (see Appendix for an example of one of the letters). Those acts which

constituted potential threats to the Receiver's face were then identified and categorised according to their contribution to the discourse of the letter, as follows:

**Category 1** contributed to the establishment of the Sender/Receiver relationship within the mode of a letter, i.e. they created the structure of a letter. These were:

- a) The **Salutation**, used to address (and identify) the Receiver, e.g. Dear Donald.
- b) The **Close**, used to signal the completion of the letter, e.g. Yours sincerely.
- c) The **Signature**, used to identify the Sender, including details of professional position, academic titles, company etc., e.g. Catherine Nickerson, Arts Officer.
- d) The **Context**, used to establish the Sender's reason for making contact with the Receiver, e.g. Thank you for your letter of 4th, October...
- e) The **Pre-Close**, an element which may or may not occur immediately before the Close in order to signal or prepare the Close, e.g. I look forward to hearing from you.

**Category 2** were used to convey the informational content of the letter. These were:

- a) **Confirmation**, used to authenticate, verify or clarify information already known to the Receiver, e.g. As we agreed on the telephone, the meeting will now be held on...
- b) **Enclose**, used to indicate that information is being sent together with the letter, e.g. Further to X, I attach...
- c) **Request**, used to ask the Receiver to do something, e.g. Please forward the contract...
- d) **Inform**, used to convey news to the Receiver, e.g. The event will be sponsored by X.
- e) **Suggestion**, used to describe a course of action which the Sender feels may be beneficial for the Receiver to follow, e.g. I would advise you to...
- f) **Apology**, used to acknowledge or accept responsibility for an action or event detrimental to the Receiver, e.g. that this was not understood... was my fault...  
An Apology act is itself a mitigation.

Each of the above acts was then analysed for evidence of mitigation by the Sender, including the percentage number of mitigation occurrences per act and the polarity and specific type of politeness strategy used. Frequent reference was made to the original letters in which the politeness strategies occurred, in order to establish whether the Senders' decision to use a mitigating strategy and their subsequent use of a positive rather than a negative strategy (or vice versa), could be accounted for by their relationship with the Receiver and/or the subject matter of the letter.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Tables 1 & 2 below give information on the polarity of the strategies used with or in close proximity to the acts in each of the categories, where + indicates the use of positive mitigation only, - the use of negative mitigation only, and +/- both positive and negative mitigation.

**Table 1: Polarity of Politeness Strategies for Category 1**

Act	Polarity
Context	+/- mitigation strategies used
Pre-Close	+/- mitigation strategies used

Positive and negative politeness strategies could be identified in the realisations of **Context** and **Pre-Close**.

**Table 2: Polarity of Politeness Strategies for Category 2**

Act	Polarity
Confirmation	+/-
Enclose	+/-
Request	-(& proximity to + strategy)
Inform	-(& proximity to + strategy)
Suggestion	-(& proximity to + strategy)

It was possible to identify mitigation strategies in the realisations of all the acts in Category 2. (As mentioned above, **Apology** acts are themselves an example of negative mitigation). **Confirmation** and **Enclose** acts included both positive and negative strategies. **Request**, **Inform** and **Suggestion** acts included negative strategies within their realisations to reduce the threat to the Receiver's face which they may pose, and in addition, they also occurred in close proximity to a positive strategy within the discourse of the letter.

Table 3 lists the type of positive strategies used and their frequency of occurrence together with examples taken from the data, and Table 4 the type of negative strategies, their frequency of occurrence and corresponding examples. The percentages in Tables 3 & 4 were calculated from the number of times a given politeness strategy could be identified within each act. For example, 35% of the total number of Pre-Close acts used the positive mitigating strategy of 'being optimistic' in linguistic realisations such as "I look forward to hearing from you in due course",

whereas 8.5% of them used the negative strategy 'go on record as incurring a debt' including phrases such as "Thank you for your co-operation".

**Table 3: Positive Strategies based on Brown & Levinson, 1978)**

Act	Politeness Strategy	%	E.g.
Salutation	Use appropriate forms of Address	N/A	Dear Donald
Close			Yours sincerely
Signature			Catherine Nickerson, Arts Officer
Context placed in opening move	Establish common ground	(100) All the Senders placed the Context in the opening move	I am writing to ask... It was a pleasure to meet you on Tuesday Further to our recent correspondence
Context	Establish common ground	29	We have spoken on a number of occasions
Pre-Close	Be Optimistic	35	I look forward to hearing from you
Enclose	i) Sender asserts knowledge of and concern for Receiver's wants (- mitigation using + strategy)	i) 17.6	i) Also enclosed an X which may be of some general use...
	ii) Be Optimistic	ii) 5.9	ii) I am pleased to enclose
Confirmation	Be Optimistic Establish common ground	16	I am pleased to confirm

**Table 4: Negative Strategies (based on Brown & Levinson, 1978)**

Act	Politeness Strategy	%	E.g.
Context	Go on record as incurring a debt	29	Thank you for your recent enquiry...
Pre-Close Included in Letter	Go on record as incurring a debt	59.8	Please contact me if you have any further queries... I look forward to hearing from you... Once again many thanks for your co-operation...
Pre-Close	Show deference	35	I look forward to hearing from you...
Pre-Close	Go on record as incurring a debt	8.5	Thank you for your assistance...
Confirmation	Be pessimistic Hedged Minimise imposition	32	May I confirm I would like to confirm
Enclose	Minimise imposition	14.7	Please find enclosed
Request	Go on record as incurring a debt Be Pessimistic Hedged Minimise imposition	93.5	I should be grateful if you would consider... I wonder if you could give me...
Inform	Impersonalise Sender and Receiver	6.3	Recognising this need, the County Council has organised...
Suggestion	Be Pessimistic Hedged	55	I would suggest... I wonder if I could just suggest one small change...
Apology	Admit impingement Give reasons Beg forgiveness	(100) For the receiver, an Apology is a Mitigation of an FTA	I apologise for the inconvenience... I was unable to reply sooner due to industrial action at the port of entry... I hope these will serve as some kind of compensation for the trouble you have taken in writing to us...

(Note: Due to a very large number of Inform acts, a sample of only 25 letters was examined to categorise these acts.)

### Category 1: Creation of letter structure

The realisations of **Salutation, Close and Signature** all exhibited considerable sensitivity to the frequency of correspondence between the Sender and the Receiver. For example, the Salutation "Dear + First Name", was used only in frequent correspondence, i.e. where there is a low social distance. The more frequent the contact the less likely it was for a Sender to include their company name in the Signature, and likewise, the lower the social distance the more likely it was for "Best wishes" to be used as (part of) the Close. Failure to observe the conventions associated with social distance in these acts within a business letter, may contravene the 'use appropriate forms of address' requirement described by Brown and Levinson and therefore constitute a threat to the positive face of the Receiver. This potential for an FTA in using inappropriate forms of address was shown to be the case by Jablin and Krone (1984), when they investigated the structural and content characteristics of employment rejection letters, and considered the effect they had on the job applicants' feelings about themselves and their feelings about the letter they received. They found that the applicants' self-perception was affected by the type of Salutation used, e.g. they felt more self-satisfaction when a formal salutation was used.

For British business correspondence, once a decrease in social distance has caused a corresponding change in what is an appropriate form of address in the Salutation, Signature and Close, these realisations then become fixed, i.e. once John Smith has become "Dear John", he can no longer be addressed as "Dear Mr Smith" without the Sender risking an FTA. An exception to this would be in a letter where the Sender and Receiver's institutionalised roles override the social distance variable, for instance in the covering letter to a legal document. In this case, although John Smith may be the addressee identified in the Salutation, the real Receivers are the group of people who have access to the document. If John Smith's role as their representative requires the use of "Dear Mr Smith" and not "Dear John" as an appropriate Salutation, this will then override the social distance variable regardless of his individual relationship with the Sender.

In all 82 letters in the corpus under investigation the **Context**, the Sender's reason for making contact with the Receiver, was given in the opening move of the discourse i.e. immediately after the Salutation. This inclusion of the Context as the opening move can be seen as a positive mitigation strategy, Brown and Levinson's 'claiming common ground'. It is likely that U.K. Receivers expect a Context in the opening move of a business letter and its omission may therefore result in the same type of FTA posed by inappropriate forms of address. In addition to the positive mitigation associated with the inclusion of the Context in first position, a number of mitigation strategies could also be identified in their realisations. For example, the Receiver

referred to the purpose or content of the letter, e.g. "I am writing to ask...", or to an enclosure, e.g. "I enclose X as requested...", a reinforcement of the positive strategy of 'claiming or establishing common ground' and he or she referred to a letter, meeting or telephone-call prior to the letter using realisations such as "Thank you for your recent enquiry...", the negative strategy of 'going on record as incurring a debt'. In all cases in the data where this negative strategy was included in a reference to an event, the subject matter of the letter indicated a continuing relationship or the potential for a continuing relationship between the Sender and Receiver, e.g. a marketing letter which opens with "Thank you for speaking to me on the phone recently...".

The **Pre-Close** in business correspondence contains elements of both positive and negative mitigation. It is an optional element in a British business letter and its inclusion is a mitigation strategy made necessary by a potential FTA. The data indicated that a Pre-Close is used by a Sender in order to create or maintain a good relationship with their Receiver, since it is always included if the potential for an FTA is great, e.g. the letter contains a Request and/or there is a large power distance between Sender and Receiver. Almost 60% of the letters used at least one Pre-Close realisation and in addition, there was a tendency to include more than one if the threat to the Receiver's negative face was high. For example, 2 letters (from the same Sender) used 3 Pre-Close realisations to ensure the co-operation of a powerful Receiver in granting a request, e.g. "I do hope that you will be able to help us once again (1) and I look forward to hearing from you (2). If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me (3)". In this case, the Sender was a local government employee who needed a radio Station, on which she was dependent for publicity, to provide a D.J. to play the Part of Father Christmas. Although social distance may be low, the relative power distance between Sender and Receiver and the ranking of the imposition are both high. The inclusion of a Pre-Close by a Sender would seem to be an example of Brown and Levinson's negative strategy 'go on record as incurring a debt' since it acknowledges a potential threat to the Receiver's negative face, i.e. an imposition, and the need for the Sender to minimise this. In addition, as is the case with the inclusion of a Context as an opening move, the omission of a Pre-Close where the seriousness of the FTA requires its inclusion, may constitute an additional threat to the Receiver's positive face, since the Sender will be using an inappropriate convention, i.e. form of address.

A number of specific mitigation strategies could be identified in the realisations of the Pre-Close. For example, 35% of the Pre-Close realisations used "I look forward to hearing from you", which Maier (1992) has suggested combine elements of both positive and negative mitigation. They 'express deference', a negative strategy, by inviting the Receiver to make contact only if he or she wishes to and, therefore, acknowledge that his or her co-operation is necessary. They are also 'optimistic', a positive strategy, in that they assume that the Receiver

will co-operate. The data indicated that this type of realisation was used when the Sender needs the Receiver's co-operation, e.g. to comply with a Request. The negative strategy of 'going on record as incurring a debt' as in realisations such as "Once again many thanks for your co-operation", was used as a Pre-Close to mitigate a possible threat to the Receiver's negative face due to an event prior to or following the letter, or due to a request or other type of transaction in the letter. Two of the letters in the data set used this strategy in the realisations of both the Context and Pre-Close. The first of these letters is a follow-up letter to a seminar where the Sender is anxious not to damage his existing (and fruitful) relationship with the Receiver despite the fact that he has to criticise him (a transaction which clearly poses a threat to the Receiver's negative face). The letter begins "I am writing to express my thanks for the excellent seminar..." and concludes "Once again, many thanks to you...". The second letter is the marketing letter mentioned above containing a Request. The Request is a transaction which in itself requires mitigation, and mitigation is also made necessary by the relative distance between Sender and Receiver, i.e. the Receiver is in a more powerful position than the Sender since he or she may or may not choose to invest in the Sender's product. The letter begins "Thank you for speaking to me on the phone recently" and concludes "Thank you for your assistance in this matter". An interesting difference between these two letters is that the first goes 'on record as incurring a debt' for an event which has already happened, whereas the second refers to an event which the Sender hopes will happen in the future.

### Category 2: Informational content

48% of the total number of **Confirmation** realisations within the corpus contained mitigation, some of which were included within several letters written by one particular Sender to a number of different Receivers. These letters provided examples of unmitigated Confirmation realisations, and realisations which included either positive or negative mitigation. The Sender's decision to use a mitigation strategy showed a sensitivity to the relationship she has with the Receiver and to the transaction contained within the letter. For example, in two letters when she is a client, i.e. in a powerful position, the Sender uses the unmitigated "I am writing to confirm" and "I can confirm". Although she also uses "I can confirm" in another letter to a more powerful Receiver, the information confirmed in that letter is only of indirect relevance to the Sender-Receiver relationship, i.e. the ranking of the imposition is low. In a letter to a very powerful Receiver, a sponsor, she uses "May I confirm", a 'hedged' mitigation of a negative direct to face, indicating that the relationship she has with the Receiver requires the use of mitigation, and although she also uses "May I confirm" in a letter in which she is in a more powerful position than the Receiver, the contents of this letter indicate that the Receiver previously agreed to do her a very large favour, i.e. he agreed to a change in the terms of a

contract, and the ranking of the imposition is therefore high. Finally, in the same letter to the sponsor mentioned above, she uses "I am pleased to confirm...", an 'optimistic' mitigation of a positive threat to face, an interesting strategy in that it creates the impression that without the mitigation the Receiver's positive face would be threatened, or in other words, that the Receiver belongs to the same group of people as the Sender who will be made happy by this Confirmation.

Positive and negative mitigation strategies were also used in **Enclose** acts, where information was being sent together with the letter. For example, realisations such as "Please find enclosed..." are examples of the negative strategy 'minimise the imposition' acknowledging the threat to the Receiver's negative face posed by the enclosure. This strategy was used in letters where it was necessary for the Receiver to read the enclosure in order to do something beneficial for the Sender. In other realisations such as "Also enclosed an X which may be of some general use", the Sender is mitigating the threat to the Receiver's negative face posed by the enclosure by using the positive strategy of 'asserting knowledge of and concern for the Receiver's wants'. Finally, the positive strategy of 'being optimistic' was used in realisations such as "I have pleasure in enclosing...", where the context of the letter indicated that the Sender is using the enclosure to make an announcement with the intention of persuading the Receiver to do something, e.g. in a marketing letter. As is the case when this strategy is used in Confirmation acts, the aim is perhaps to persuade the Receiver (or fool them into thinking) that not receiving this information would constitute a threat to their positive face.

In total 93.5% of the **Requests** in the data were mitigated. The negative strategy of 'going on record as incurring a debt' occurred frequently, for example in realisations such as "I should be grateful if you would consider..." and "I would very much appreciate it if you could send us...", which include a further negative mitigation, 'be pessimistic', realised by verbs such as *would*, *could* and *should*. In addition, there were many examples of 'hedging', e.g. "I wonder if you could give me...", which all occurred in letters where the Receiver had more power than the Sender and where the seriousness of the FTA was therefore greater. There were only 5 unmitigated Requests in the data set, e.g. "I require...", "Delivery note to be faxed..." etc. All of these occurred in correspondence from a Head Office to one of their subsidiaries, suggesting that the Position of the Sender relative to that of the Receiver made mitigation unnecessary.

In addition to the negative strategies which were used as part of their realisations, Requests often occurred within the discourse of the letter in close proximity to positive strategies. For example, the positive strategy 'give gifts to the Hearer', e.g. "I would be delighted to provide...", occurred in several letters containing Requests. This suggests that the Sender is using an additional (positive) strategy to mitigate the threat to the Receiver's negative face posed

by the Request. In the marketing letter mentioned above, the Request "Perhaps you would be kind enough to circulate this brief letter as an introduction to Q..." is followed by an offer "I would be delighted to provide detailed information as required to yourself, or any of your colleagues, if you care to contact me". Here the Sender includes an offer (or gift for the Receiver) to mitigate the negative threat posed by their Request and in addition in this case, the offer itself is further mitigated by "if you care to contact me", an example of Brown and Levinson's 'hedging' strategy. A similar strategy is also evident in the following example, where the positive 'gift giving' mitigation preceding the Request also includes negative mitigation by being pessimistic: "We would be able [be pessimistic] to offer A. Bank the same promotional package as before... [give gifts]. We would be most grateful if you could consider raising your contribution [go on record as incurring a debt/be pessimistic]".

The majority of the realisations of the **Inform** acts in the letters were unmitigated, e.g. "The brochure focuses on ...", "The reception will be ..." etc. There were, however, several letters where Brown and Levinson's negative strategy 'impersonalise speaker and hearer' could be identified. For example, "Due to the increasing number of deliveries X is receiving we have been asked to implement the following delivery procedures", where the grammatical agent is not identified, occurred in a letter requesting the implementation of complicated procedures. A second example, "Recognising this need, the County Council has organised a scheme ..." occurred in a letter where the Sender, a representative of the County Council, is at pains not to impose the scheme on the Receiver. In both cases, the ranking of the imposition on the Receiver is high and must therefore be mitigated. In addition, as with Requests, in letters conveying marketing information, i.e. a negative threat to face, the positive strategy of 'giving gifts' also occurred in close proximity to specific information about a product or service, e.g. "The brochure focusses on our new range of X. Further copies are available free of charge ...".

As with the realisations of Requests and with specific types of Information, the **Suggestions** in the data included negative mitigation strategies themselves and occurred in close proximity to positive strategies. For example, "I would suggest ..." is 'pessimistic' and acknowledges the right of the Receiver not to accept the Suggestion and "If you require these, I suggest ..." is 'hedged' and does not assume that the Receiver will still require the item in question. "I wonder if I could just suggest one small change ...", taken from a letter where the Receiver has more power than the Sender, is also 'hedged' and acknowledges the possibility that the change may not be welcome to the Receiver. There were 2 letters in which the positive 'giving gifts' strategy was used directly before a Suggestion in order to mitigate the threat to face. In the first of these, "The programme you suggest is excellent" is followed by "I wonder if I could just suggest one small change ...". In the second, "The seminar achieved its aims ... it was both interesting and useful" is followed by "It was felt by some participants that the style of presentation could have

been a bit more varied in order to break up the day", which is in turn followed by a further (positive) mitigation, "This comment does not, however, detract from the pleasure at the success of the event". In all cases where a Suggestion was prefaced by positive mitigation, the context of the letter indicated that the Sender needed to ensure the co-operation of the Receiver in the future, e.g. the Receiver regularly organised seminars for the Sender.

The **Apology** acts in the corpus are negative politeness strategies. They provide examples of Brown and Levinson's strategies 'admit the impingement', e.g. "I apologise for the inconvenience", 'give overwhelming reasons', e.g. "I was unable to reply sooner due to industrial action at the port of entry" and 'beg forgiveness', e.g. "I hope these will serve as some kind of compensation for the trouble you have taken in writing to us". As predicted by Brown and Levinson, Senders included more strategies the greater the power distance and ranking of the imposition. For example, the following extract contains all three types of strategies. It is taken from a letter where the Receiver is in a very powerful position, since the Sender's success depends on the Receiver's co-operation in agreeing with a possibly unwelcome change of plan: "Having an orchestra of 40 and a choir of 30 to accommodate on that evening, I am afraid that we shall be very limited on dressing room accommodation backstage. X may, therefore, have to share a dressing room with the conductor. I do hope that he will not mind about this, and I apologise for the inconvenience".

## 5. Conclusion

In addressing the Receiver, in identifying themselves and in signalling the completion of the letter, the Sender is required to use those forms of address which are appropriate for the social distance between themselves and the Receiver. In establishing the reason for making contact with the Receiver, the Sender must do so in the opening move of the discourse, immediately after addressing the Receiver, and furthermore, if the letter contains an FTA and one or more of the variables determining the seriousness of the FTA are high, the end of the letter must be signalled by the inclusion of an additional preparatory act, the Pre-Close. Finally, in establishing the reason for making contact with the Receiver and/or preparing the completion of the letter, the more necessary or difficult it is for a Sender to preserve a continuing relationship (or the potential for a continuing relationship) the more likely he or she is to use the negative strategy of 'going on record as incurring a debt'.

In conveying information to the Receiver, where mitigation is necessary, British business writers generally use negative mitigation within the realisations of a given act. The ranking of the imposition associated with certain acts also seems to be higher than for others. It is, for

instance, much more likely that a Sender will need to include a mitigation strategy when asking a Receiver to do something, than it would be when the Sender is conveying news to the Receiver. Furthermore, the greater the potential for an FTA, the greater the variety and/or combination of different strategies that are used, as is the case for example in apologising to a powerful Receiver. In addition to the negative mitigation strategies used within the realisations of Requests for action, items of news and/or Suggestions, the more important or difficult it is to maintain a good relationship with the Receiver, the more likely it is for a Sender to reinforce the mitigation by using the positive strategy of 'giving gifts' in close proximity to these acts within the discourse of the letter. Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that positive mitigation is also used in confirming information already known to the Receiver and/or indicating that information is being sent together with the letter. It is possible, however, that this method of 'establishing common ground' is only appropriate within the restricted context of marketing discourse, and it will only be effective if, indeed, there is common ground to be established.

The politeness strategies identified in this study are the result of the interpersonal and transactional constraints which operate on the rhetoric of British business correspondence. Further investigation into the politeness strategies used in business correspondence in languages other than English might also be of interest, as would the differences in British and American English. In addition, it would be useful to investigate Receivers' reactions to the omission of politeness strategies, as well as to variation in their polarity, in different languages and/or cultures, and in specific types of letters, e.g. direct mail letters. Finally, further investigation of the use of politeness strategies in specific acts in letters written by one Sender to a variety of different Receivers would be particularly interesting in order to categorise the corresponding variation in strategies in more detail.

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