Politeness in e-mail communication

Media Selection and Rhetorical Savvy in Virtual Teams

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Problem

- Email is the main means of communication for virtual teams

- Email doesn't have the body language, tone, and contextual cues found in face to face, phone, or even chat

ENRON Data

- Originally 500,000 messages

- EnronSent Corpus

  - http://verbs.colorado.edu/enronsent/

  - 96,000 Messages

  - Sample size = 400+ messages

    - Coded for face threatening acts (Face Threatening Act) and politeness strategies

  - 150 of the sample has been coded for subordinate reporting structure

Subordinate Reporting

Politeness framework

Politeness Framework for Subordinate Reporting (Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2003)

Relational needs

- Deference

- Non-imposition

- Solidarity

Organizational needs

- Confidence

- Direction

- Individuality

Deference (Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2003, p. 397)

- Respect for reporting relationships and the organizational structure

- Changes based on the situation

"Vince:

If it is all right, I would like to take two days vacation, Monday and Tuesday April 24 and 25.

Please let me know.

Thanks!"

Confidence (Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2003, p. 397)

- Assures others that the communicator is competent and can complete assigned tasks

"Dawn,

I met David Sobotka from Koch this morning and we talked about coordinating our presentations. This means there will be changes intended to avoid overlaps. Sorry for that.

The portions of my presentation will survive (those about valuation paradigms) and I shall add a few more pages on accounting treatment of weather derivatives plus more specific examples.

David will cover primarily market evolution + plus examples of some standard structures, and we shall both give more interesting examples of specific deals executed by our companies.

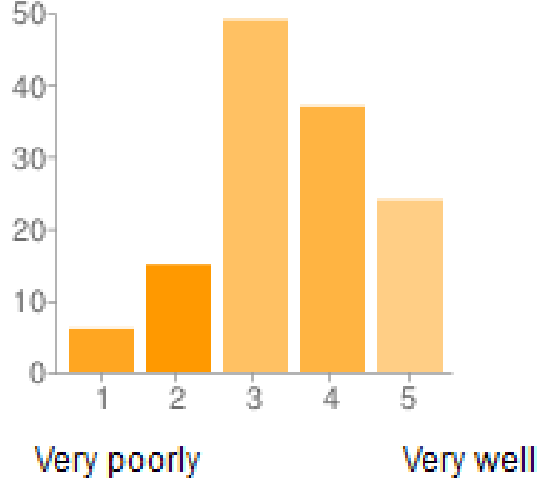I shall send you an updated version of my part next week. Let me know what the deadline is."

Does this message rely more upon deference or confidence?

Confidence [70]		
Neither / Unknown		
Deference [60]		
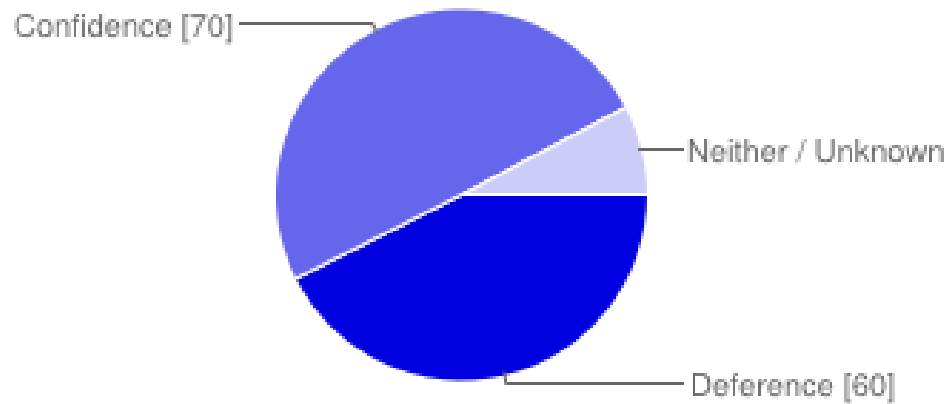
Deference	60	43%
Confidence	70	50%
Neither / Unknown	11	8%

To the best of your knowledge, how well does this message balance deference and confidence?

1 -	Very poorly	6	4%
2		15	11%
3		49	35%
4		37	26%
5 -	Very well	24	17%

Very poorly   Very well

Non-Imposition (Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2003, p. 397)

- Not burdening the reader or restricting her freedom

"Hey,

I tried not to bother you today. Spent today working on the EBS Q4 & 2002 Action Plan and the Cash Flow Forecast and generally catching up. I spoke with DiMichele & Racicot and also and got a general update. I guess things look pretty bleak.

Just one point - being that I'm 5,000 miles from home (UK) with family & kids in school - I'd obviously appreciate as much notice as possible on any implications for myself - I know that may be tough, given the pace of change around here - but bear it in mind if you can.

I would be happy to sit down and discuss any plans you may (or may not have) for me. I'm a big boy - and I realise how serious this situation is.

Thanks.

Barry."

Direction (Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2003, p. 397)

- Proactive in problem solving

- Personal initiative

Kay

All I need to know is if ENA received the gas as stated, and if there are any extenuating circumstances which would keep us from paying. Otherwise I believe we need to make payments in accordance with the terms of the deal. I'll confirm.

Does this message rely more upon non-imposition or direction?
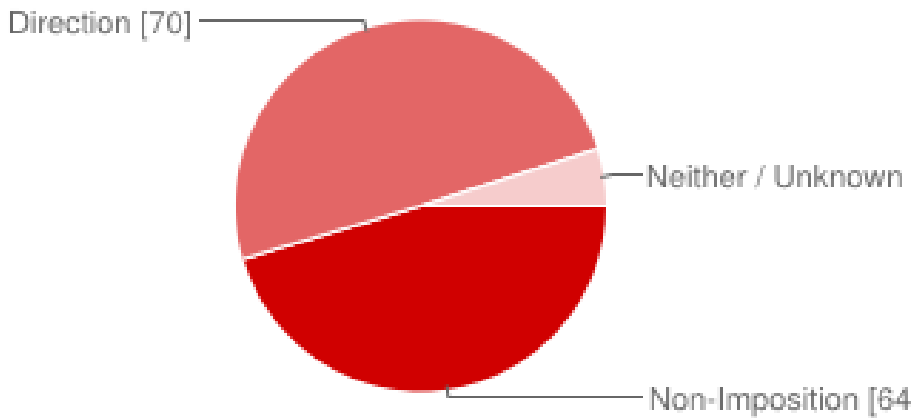
Non-Imposition	**64**	45%
Direction	**70**	50%
Neither / Unknown	**7**	5%

To the best of your knowledge, how well does this message balance non-imposition or direction?
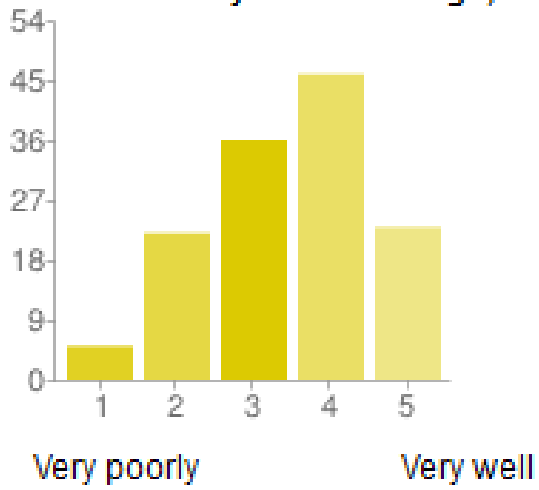
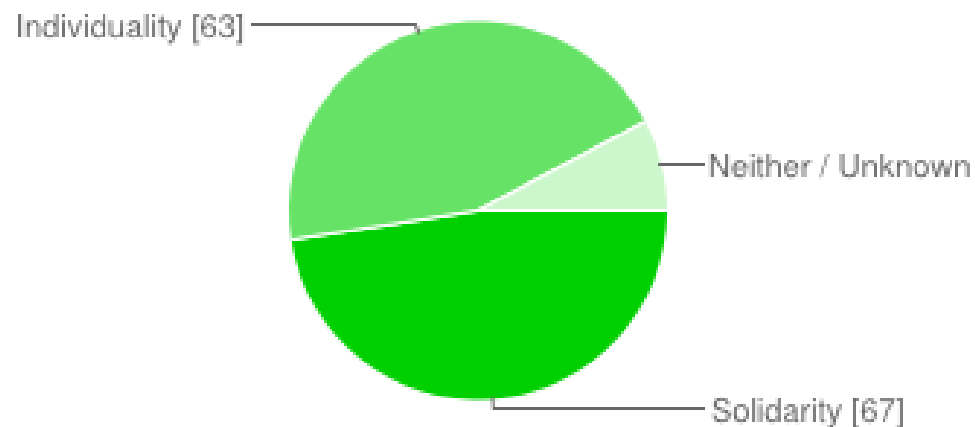|			
1 -	Very poorly	**5**	4%
2		**22**	16%
3		**36**	26%
4		**46**	33%
5 -	Very well	**23**	16%

Solidarity (Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2003, p. 397)

- Cohesion, trust, commitment, and enjoyment in working with others

Individuality (Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2003, p. 397)

- Personal responsibility to think and perform independently

Does this message rely more upon solidarity vs individuality ?

Individuality [63]

Neither / Unknown

Solidarity [67]

Solidarity	67	48%
Individuality	63	45%
Neither / Unknown	11	8%

To the best of your knowledge, how well does this message balance solidarity vs individuality ?

Very poorly
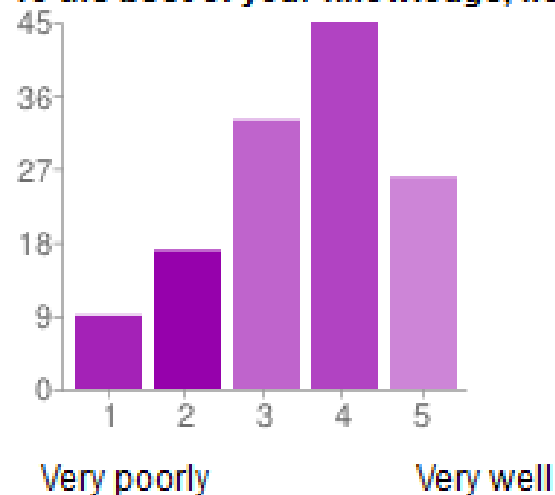
Very well

1 -	Very poorly	9	6%
2		17	12%
3		33	23%
4		45	32%
5 -	Very well	26	18%

"Hey,

I tried not to bother you today. Spent today working on the EBS Q4 & 2002 Action Plan and the Cash Flow Forecast and generally catching up. I spoke with DiMichele & Racicot and also and got a general update. I guess things look pretty bleak.

Just one point - being that I'm 5,000 miles from home (UK) with family & kids in school - I'd obviously appreciate as much notice as possible on any implications for myself - I know that may be tough, given the pace of change around here - but bear it in mind if you can.

I would be happy to sit down and discuss any plans you may (or may not have) for me. I'm a big boy - and I realise how serious this situation is.

Thanks.

Barry."

Politeness Theory

Face Threatening Acts (Face Threatening Act) and Politeness Strategies

Positive and Negative Face

(Brown and Levinson, 1987)

- Positive Face
  - Desire for others' approval or acceptance
- Negative Face
  - Desire for freedom of action

Face Threatening Act (Face Threatening Act)

(Brown and Levinson, 1987)

- Damages the face of the speaker or hearer (author or audience)

Positive Face Threatening Acts

- Actions that demonstrate a lack of care for others' feelings/wants/needs

"Per

I misplaced your emai[l] on the funds. Can you resend it please.

Thanks

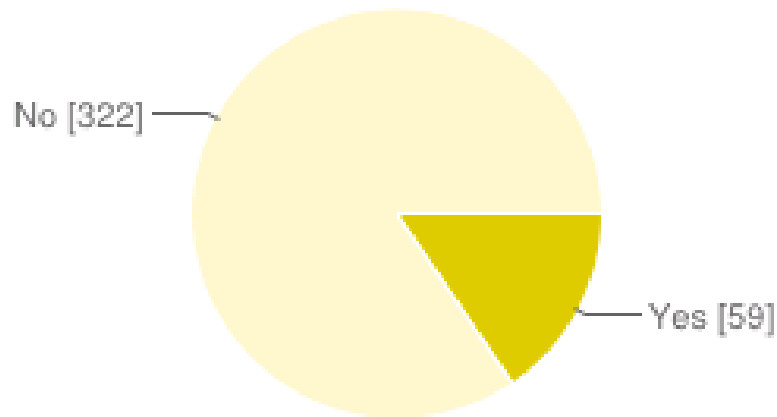John"

"First of all, Hanukkah was three weeks ago.

Second, you spelled it incorrectly.
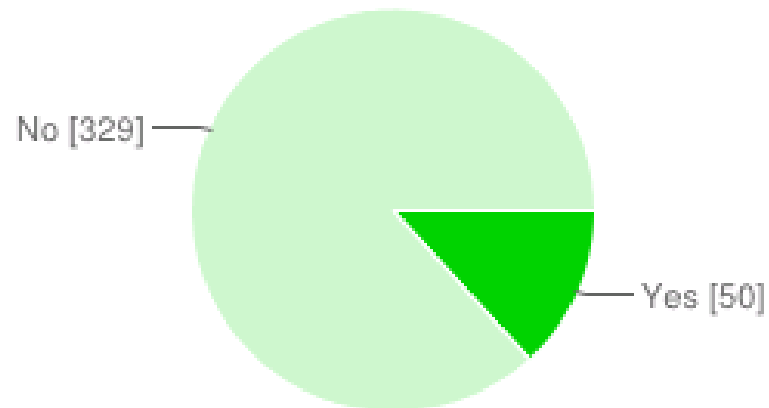
Get a clue, you idiot."

Does the message contain any positive face-threatening acts that result in "damage" to the writer?

Yes	59	15%
No	322	83%

No [322]

Yes [59]

Does the message contain any positive face-threatening acts that result in "damage" to the recipient?

Yes	**50**	13%
No	**329**	84%

No [329]

Yes [50]

Negative Face Threatening Acts

- Actions that do not avoid or intend to avoid the obstruction of the other's freedom of action
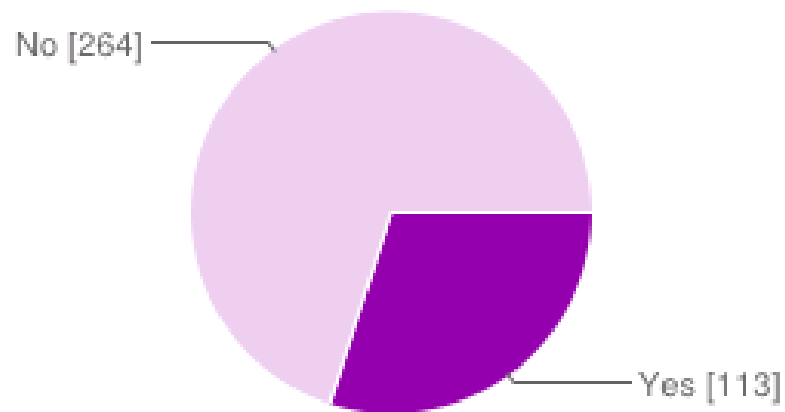
"I misplaced your emai[l] on the funds. Can you resend it please.
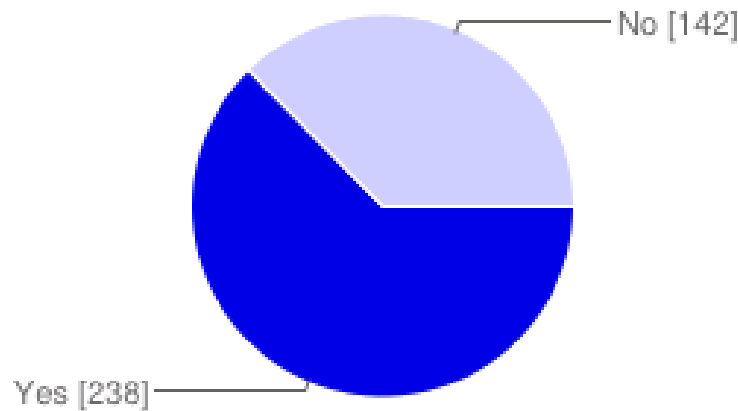
Thanks

John"

"Damage" to the Writer

Does the message contain any negative face-threatening acts that result in "damage" to the writer?

Yes	**113**	29%
No	**264**	68%

No [264]

Yes [113]

"Damage" to the Recipient

Does the message contain any negative face-threatening acts that result in "damage" to the recipient?

No [142]

Yes [238]

Yes	**238**	61%
No	**142**	36%

Politeness Strategies

(Brown and Levinson, 1987)

Used to save the hearer's face when face-threatening acts are inevitable or desired

Bald On-Record

Do not attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer's face

- Intimate relationships

- Efficiency is a priority

Intimate relationships

"[Y]ou need to have a chat with ken.

Figured you had it in hand."

Efficiency is a priority
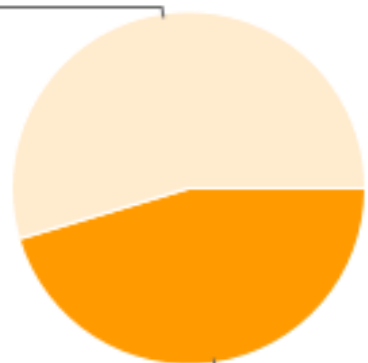
"Mr. Swanston:

The changes are fine. Please prepare execution copies and forward for signature. Let me know if you have any questions.

Sara"

Does the message contain any bald on-record politeness strategies?

Yes	**172**	44%
No	**207**	53%

No [207]

Yes [172]

Negative Politeness

- Emphasize avoidance of imposition on the hearer

"Susan,

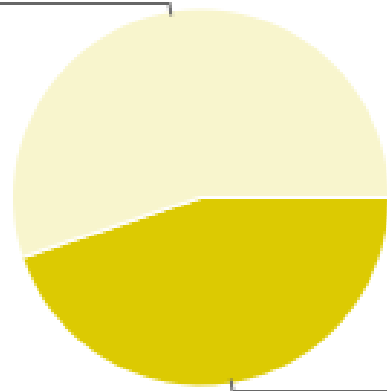[...]Can we add Portland to the map? That is the true trading location that is missing. If it is tough to do, don't worry about it.

Thanks.

--Sally"

Does the message contain any negative politeness strategies?

No [210]

Yes [171]

Yes	**171**	44%
No	**210**	54%

Less Frequently Used Strategies

- Positive Politeness

- Off-record (indirect)

Positive Politeness

- Indicates respect for the reader, the reader's position, or the reader's wants or needs

"Hey Guys!!

Joni is going to be in town this weekend and mentioned trying to get together with everyone on Saturday night. Let me know if ya'll are going to be around or not.

Clarissa...I know you said you have a wedding this weekend, but let me know if it's going to be an all night event.

Thanks,

Meredith"

Does the message contain any positive politeness strategies?
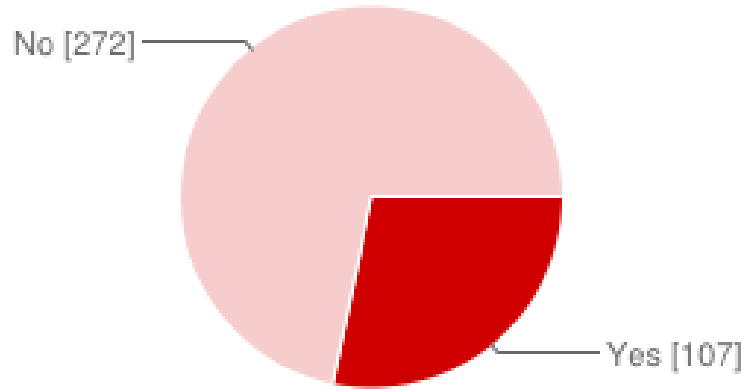
Yes	**107**	27%
No	**272**	70%

Off-record (indirect)

- Uses indirect language and removes the speaker from the potential to be imposing
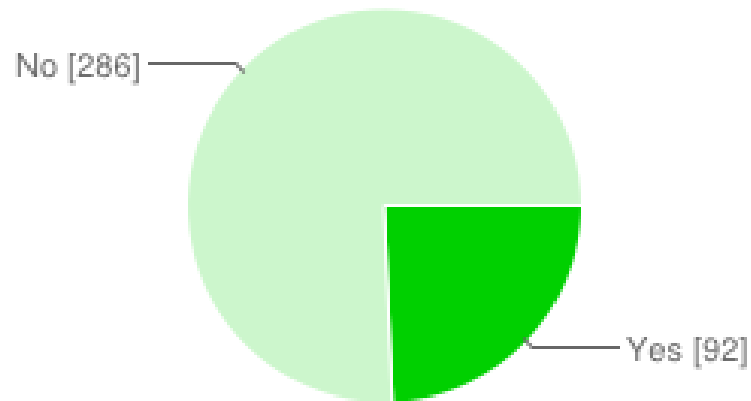
"Chris,

I would like to get a confirmation number from your treasury department once wires are sent.

Thanks,

Pete

713-207-1471"

Does the message contain any indirect politeness strategies?

Yes	**92**	24%
No	**286**	73%

No [286] — (pie chart) — Yes [92]

What is the takeaway?

- Politeness as part of the rhetorical situation

- Help prepare our students for the complex needs of politeness within subordinate reporting

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Resources

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