Chat reference communication patterns and implications: applying politeness theory

Lynn Westbrook (School of Information, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA)
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Abstract
Purpose
The purpose of this study is to examine the use of formality indicators in chat reference interchanges within the context of politeness theory, with its corollaries of face-threat and social relationship development.

Design/methodology/approach
This discourse analysis identifies the syntactic and content indicators and patterns of formality levels in a purposive sample of 402 chat transcripts (covering 6,572 minutes) from one academic year at a large, US, public university.

Findings
Syntactic formality markers include regular use of contractions, slang, sentence fragments, and non-standard punctuation as well as limited use of acronyms and abbreviations with rare use of emoticons. Content-based markers included apologies, self-disclosure, and expressions of extreme need. Use patterns are related to the level of responsibility assumed by the librarian as well as the interview stages.

Research limitations/implications
A limited data source and potential coder bias are the two limitations of this study. The research implications point to the need for chat reference librarians to assume greater control of formality nuances in order to encourage a more effective search for the user.

Practical implications
The fundamentals of politeness theory, particularly in terms of formality indicators, should be incorporated into staff training and behavioral standards for reference librarians. While future research is needed to determine the most effective means of employing this theoretical construct, this study implies that a self-reflective, culturally sensitive use of the nuances of formality can enhance the user’s experience.

Originality/value
This study is the first to systematically examine formality indicators in the context of politeness theory. The use of two coders, a full academic year’s worth of data, and a substantial sample provide great depth.

Keywords
Information research | Communication technologies | Communication

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Politeness theory emphasizes balancing the need for clear communication (in pursuit of your goals) against the need to protect both your face and the face of the other through facework (O'Keefe & Shepherd, 1987). By asking for something which is inherently face threatening, we do so politely by engaging in clear communication while boosting the face of the other person. For example, when applied interculturally, face theory is used to explore differences in the ways cultures manage face. Such an application has led to the development of another theory that is presented in Chapter 30, Face Negotiation Theory. Research on a wide variety of communication issues has examined the role of face and facework. Politeness is defined as using communicative strategies to create and maintain social harmony. This can be done in various ways: being contextually appropriate, following social and cultural norms. Why is Politeness Theory important? In the foreword to the book, linguist John Gumperz claims that politeness in language is studied to enhance our general understanding of social order and human cooperation within society. Some Example Research. The article concludes that there is a great need for doctors with communication skills because of these issues. Politeness in government. This article looks at how MPs use politeness in 'Question Time', in order to maintain a 'parliamentary language' while effectively arguing. The research implications point to the need for chat reference librarians to assume greater control of formality nuances in order to encourage a more effective search for the user. Practical implications. – The fundamentals of politeness theory, particularly in terms of formality indicators, should be incorporated into staff training and behavioral standards for reference librarians. – This study is the first to systematically examine formality indicators in the context of politeness theory. The use of two coders, a full academic year's worth of data, and a substantial sample provide great depth. Keywords.