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# A Matter of Politeness? On the Role of Face-Threatening Acts in Online Tutoring

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## 1. Introduction

More and more human communication processes shift to Social Media. In this study, we focus on tutoring as a specific learning situation since it is easily transferred to online communication settings and, above all, constitutes a very effective form of instruction (Cohen/Kulik/Kulik 1982; Graesser/D’Mello/Cade 2010).

Over the past 20 years, research has identified behaviours typically exhibited by tutors and pinpointed those which are effective in facilitating learning gains on part of the tutee (Graesser/Person/Magliano 1995; Lepper/Woolverton 2002). However, there are tutorial moves which tutors, especially novice tutors, seem hesitant to use: Novice tutors use more motivational and less cognitive scaffolding than expert tutors although cognitive scaffolding seems to have a larger impact on learning outcomes (Cromley/Azevedo 2005). Person et al. (1995) argue that tutors’ reluctance to use certain instructional strategies is due to their desire to not impose on their tutees. They assumed that these strategies, e.g.

negative feedback or requesting actions, are incompatible with politeness principles to which tutors try to adhere.

In our previous studies, we have focused on the tutors' actions and found that politeness considerations do indeed impact on the use of specific tutoring strategies (Brummernhenrich/Jucks 2013; Bromme/Jucks/Runde 2012). In the current study, we focus on the recipients' perspective. Duthler (2006: 515) notes that "politeness varied with communication medium" and points out specific characteristics of synchronous text-based communication, i.e. chat, as used in the current study. According to Sussman/Sproull (1999, in Duthler 2006: 518), synchronous CMC can be "more direct and less polite than synchronous telephone or face-to-face interactions". Therefore, it seems beneficial to examine the role of politeness in online tutoring settings.

## **2. Politeness Theory**

Brown and Levinson (1987) posit that certain speech acts threaten the face of the interlocutor (face-threatening acts, FTAs), referring to the concept of face as defined by Goffman (1967). They differentiate positive face, meaning a person's desire for social acceptance and belonging, and negative face, the desire to be autonomous and unrestricted in one's actions. According to their theory people use linguistic politeness strategies when performing FTAs in order to communicate their will to respect these two face aspects. Just as there is a positive and negative face, there are also positive and negative politeness strategies to attend to them. Each set of strategies aims at mitigating the face-threat of certain kinds of speech acts that contain an imposition, such as requests or corrections.

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Concerning tutorial settings, research indicates that polite behaviour can entail both benefits and detriments. Person et al. (1995) give a detailed analysis of tutorial moves and their advantages and disadvantages. They conclude that excessive politeness can hinder the effectiveness of tutoring. Similarly, we found in a previous study that tutors explained more extensively when encouraged to disregard face concerns (Bromme/Jucks/Runde 2012). Wang et al. (2008) however found a positive effect of polite tutorial feedback on learning gains. In a series of studies, Kerssen-Griep and his group showed that polite instructors improved learners' perceptions of several relevant variables: positive learning relationships (Kerssen-Griep/Hess/Trees 2003), effective mentoring and positive classroom atmosphere (Kerssen-Griep/Trees/Hess 2008), as well as fair and useful feedback (Trees/Kerssen-Griep/Hess 2009). We obtained similar results in an experimental setting using instructional forum interactions: Polite tutors were judged as applying more face work, being more oriented towards the recipient, more credible and more likable (Jucks/Brummernhenrich/Päuler in press). Jessmer and Anderson (2001) found that recipients judged persons who formulated emails in a polite manner as friendlier, more likable and more competent than those who communicated less politely.

In sum, there seem to be two directions of findings: On the one hand there are indications that politeness could hinder effective tutoring due to a loss of clarity and comprehensibility. Note, however, that politeness does not necessarily implicate indirectness (Blum-Kulka 1987) and that politeness theory delineates several different ways to redress FTAs. Moreover, Park (2008) did not find any differences between groups that were instructed to communicate either politely or effectively. On the other hand, there seem to be positive effects of politeness in tutorial settings.

### 3. Rationale for the Present Study

In the current study, we take a closer look on the effects of politeness in tutoring processes from the recipients' point of view. Hence, our examination focuses on tutors' utterances. While in a previous study, we fabricated forum interactions (Jucks/Brummernhenrich/Päuler in press) to realise the experimental politeness manipulation, we now use utterances taken from a natural setting to ensure ecological validity. However, we reach beyond a mere text corpus analysis and achieve an experimental setting by randomly presenting the materials and systematically varying the manner of face work. Our basic question is: What impact do tutors' moves have on the recipients depending on which politeness strategy they choose? We examine two politeness strategies, derived from Brown and Levinson's theory: *bald/on record* and *negative politeness*. Based on the findings discussed above, we postulate the following hypotheses:

**H1** Recipients perceive tutorial moves that are combined with negative politeness as more polite and perceive a higher amount of face work stemming from the tutor.

H1 is consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory. Note that, since we varied the amount and format of FTA in our materials, this hypothesis also serves as a manipulation check.

Kerssen-Griep/Trees/Hess (2008) found that attentive feedback leads to a greater satisfaction among students concerning their learning relationship with their teachers. We therefore assume that face work, realised here through negative politeness, leads to a better appraisal of the tutor:

**H2** The impression of the tutor's communication style is more positive if he applies negative politeness while making the tutorial move.

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On the basis of previous studies, which indicated a relation of politeness and perceived competence (Trees/Kerssen-Griep/Hess 2009; Jessmer/Anderson 2001), the following prediction was made:

**H3** Credibility is perceived higher if the tutorial move is combined with negative politeness.

The results of Person et al. (1995) lead us to assume:

**H4** Comprehensibility is rated higher if the tutorial move is uttered in a bald/on record manner.

In line with Kerssen-Griep/Trees/Hess (2008) and Jessmer/Anderson (2001), we predict the following:

**H5** The impression of the tutor's likeability is more positive if he applies negative politeness while making the tutorial move.

### **3.1. Method**

For the present work, verbal data from a previous study in the context of instructional CMC (Brummernhenrich/Jucks 2013) was analysed as to the use of politeness strategies. Passages of the discourses served as stimulus material for the recipient study. The aim was to examine the assessment of the tutors' utterances by the addressees regarding perceived audience design, credibility, comprehensibility, likeability and use of face work.

### **3.2. Participants**

111 persons participated in the online survey. They were recruited in social networks, in university lectures and courses and via mailing lists. They either received course credit or had a 3:1 chance to win a €10 voucher for an internet store. Participants who filled out the survey with interruptions or who needed less than ten minutes were excluded. On average, it took the participants 25.23

minutes ( $SD = 12.65$ ) to complete the survey. Furthermore, participants had to have judged both bald and polite utterances as these were to be compared within subjects. 81 persons remained for further analysis. 59 were female. Age ranged from 18 to 60, mean age was 24.99 ( $SD = 7.33$ ). The participants reported using computers for a mean of 23.62 hours ( $SD = 11.02$ ) a week and spending on average 19.02 hours a week ( $SD = 10.52$ ) using the internet.

Preliminary analyses revealed no significant differences between experimental conditions regarding gender, age, computer or internet use. Therefore, these variables were not analysed any further.

### **3.3. Materials**

For the dialogue sequences to be rated by addressees, we used verbal data from naturalistic online tutoring sessions (Brummernhenrich/Jucks 2013). The learning task of these sessions was to perform a statistical analysis using common software, a typical task in psychology research methods courses. In a one-to-one setting, the tutor, an experienced psychology student, communicated with the tutee, a student with only basic statistical knowledge. Tutor and tutee were situated in different rooms; communication was realised via an instant messenger program and saved as text files afterwards. We content-analysed the tutors' moves, applying a coding scheme by D'Mello/Olney/Person (2010) for tutorial moves and Brown/Levinson's (1987) theory for politeness strategies. For the recipient study, we selected utterances from several tutorial situations that had been coded either bald/on record or with negative politeness and that participants could judge without knowing what was taking place on the tutee's screen and without knowledge about the subject matter. To give context to the tutor's utterance, at least one utterance of the tutee was included. We ended up with a pool of 12 dialogue sequences. The critical utterances to

be rated were pointed out through bold type. An example of the bald/on record condition was “Look at the second table” [Schau dir die zweite Tabelle an]<sup>1</sup>, an example of the negative politeness condition was “You might want to look that up again” [Du kannst es ruhig noch mal nachgucken].

### **3.4. Design**

We conducted a 1x2 factorial design with the within-subjects factor politeness strategy (bald/on record or negative politeness). The study was realised as an online survey. Each participant rated three randomly selected dialogue sequences using the scales presented below.

### **3.5. Dependent measures**

Measures were assessed on 5-point Likert scales from 1 (low) to 5 (high), or, when items consisted of bipolar pairs, on a 5-point scale between the respective poles.

*Tutor’s instructional face work.* To measure how polite the tutor seemed to the participant, we used the Revised Instructional Face-Support Scale (RIFS; Kerssen-Griep/Trees/Hess 2008). We adapted the items to measure how the participants perceived the use of positive (4 items) and negative politeness (4 items) by the tutors. Scale consistencies were Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  values of .85 (positive face work scale) and .80 (negative face work scale).

*Tutor’s Recipient Orientation.* The recipient orientation scale (ROS; Bromme/Jucks/Runde 2005) was used to assess four aspects of the participants’ perception of the tutor’s communication: (1) the *per-*

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<sup>1</sup> The study was conducted in German.

*ceived audience design*, i.e. the extent to which the tutor tried to take into account a layperson's perspective (10 items), (2) *subjective assessment of one's own comprehension* (5 items), (3) *the tutor's specialised knowledge and commitment to writing on this specific issue* (4 items), and (4) *emotional evaluation* (3 items).

The items were modified so that the tutor was the agent. Not all items could be used in the limited context of our study. We omitted one item of the *audience design* scale, the complete *subjective assessment* scale, one item of the *tutor's knowledge and commitment* scale and one item of the *emotional evaluation* scale. All subscales received satisfactory consistencies with an  $\alpha$  value of .88 for perceived audience design and values of at least .78 for the other scales.

*Tutor's Credibility.* The Credibility Scale (McCroskey/Teven 1999) was designed to assess source credibility on the three scales *competence*, *trustworthiness* and *goodwill*. Each scale consists of six bipolar adjective pairs. Items were translated and instructions were modified using the word "tutor". We omitted three items of the trustworthiness scale which were not suitable for the dialogues. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values were .89 for competence, .90 for goodwill and .81 for trustworthiness.

*Social Relation to the tutor.* Two items were used to assess the appraisal of the social relation with the tutor: "I find the tutor likable" and "I could imagine to work with this tutor". Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .91.

*Comprehensibility of tutor's utterances.* We employed a measure originally developed by Langer, Schulz von Thun and Tausch (1993) to rate the comprehensibility of written texts and oral information. Following the example of Clark et al. (2003), we applied the measure for the purpose of assessing our participants' comprehensibility perceptions. The inventory measures four characteristics on bipolar scales: simplicity, structure/order, conciseness,



additional stimulation. We omitted four items which were not suitable for our context. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values were .80 for simplicity (6 items), .80 for structure (4 items), .84 for conciseness (6 items).

## **4. Results**

Preliminary analyses revealed most of our data to be nonnormal. Therefore, Winsorized values were used in the inferential analyses to provide more robust estimators (Erceg-Hurn/Mirosevich 2008) and are also reported here.

In order to evaluate our hypotheses, we calculated repeated measures MANOVAs (for all dependent variables containing more than one subscale) or a repeated measures ANOVA (for the social relation scale) with communication strategy (bald/on record or negative politeness) as within-subject factor. When the multivariate results attained significance, we conducted univariate analyses to ascertain whether the direction of differences for each of the subscales was in line with our hypotheses.

When presenting our results, we define an  $\alpha$  level of  $p < .05$  as significant. In line with Cohen (1988), we interpreted effect sizes as follows:  $\eta_p^2 = .01$  as a small effect,  $\eta_p^2 = .06$  as a medium effect, and  $\eta_p^2 = .14$  as a large effect. The Winsorized means and standard deviations of all dependent variables in the two conditions are presented in Table 1.

### **4.1. Hypothesis 1: Perceptions of tutor's instructional face work**

H1 posited that negative polite tutoring moves are perceived as containing more face work. The multivariate analyses confirmed

that the experimental manipulation had a large, significant effect on participants' face work ratings,  $F(2, 79) = 50.39$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .56$ . The univariate tests for the two subscales both attained significance, showing large effects on positive,  $F(1, 80) = 48.61$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .38$ , and negative face work,  $F(1, 80) = 73.91$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .48$ . In both cases, polite utterances were rated as containing more face work (positive face work:  $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ; negative face work:  $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ) than bald ones (positive:  $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ; negative:  $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ), thus confirming hypothesis 1.

#### **4.2. Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of tutor's communication style**

In H2, we assumed that participants would judge the tutor's communication style more positively when reading polite utterances than when reading bald utterances. This hypothesis was partly confirmed.

The multivariate analysis showed a large, significant effect of politeness strategy on the ROS ratings,  $F(3, 78) = 6.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .20$ . The univariate analysis however only showed an effect for the emotional evaluation subscale: Polite utterances were evaluated significantly more positively ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 0.39$ ) than bald ones ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ),  $F(1, 80) = 14.89$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .16$ , large effect. Contrary to our expectations, there were no significant differences between conditions for either audience design,  $F(1, 80) = 0.92$ ,  $p = .34$ , or expert's knowledge and commitment,  $F(1, 80) = 0.74$ ,  $p = .39$ .

#### **4.3. Hypothesis 3: Perceptions of tutor's credibility**

We expected that polite utterances would lead to a higher perceived credibility of the tutor. The multivariate analysis with the credibility measures showed a large, significant effect for the ex-

perimental manipulation,  $F(3, 78) = 28.26$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .52$ . The univariate analyses showed significant effects for two of the subscales: When judging polite utterances, participants assigned more goodwill ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ) and more trustworthiness ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.31$ ) to the tutor than from bald utterances (goodwill:  $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ,  $F(1, 80) = 49.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .38$ , large effect; trustworthiness:  $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ,  $F(1, 80) = 10.66$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .12$ , medium effect). No significant difference was found for the competence subscale,  $F(1, 80) = 1.47$ ,  $p = .23$ . Thus, the hypothesis was mostly confirmed.

#### **4.4. Hypothesis 4: Comprehensibility of tutor's utterances**

We assumed that polite utterances would lead to a reduced clearness of the content explained. The MANOVA with the comprehensibility subscales confirmed a large, significant effect of the politeness strategy of the utterances,  $F(4, 77) = 20.90$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .52$ .

However, the results of the univariate analyses were heterogeneous: The politeness of the utterances had no effect on the perception of their simplicity,  $F(1, 80) = 1.40$ ,  $p = .24$ , or structure,  $F(1, 80) = 1.43$ ,  $p = .24$ . However, the other two subscales reached significance, showing large effects for the experimental manipulation, albeit in opposite directions: Polite utterances were judged as more stimulating ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) but less concise ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 0.26$ ) than bald utterances (additional stimulation:  $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ,  $F(1, 80) = 39.97$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .33$ ; conciseness:  $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 0.29$ ,  $F(1, 80) = 28.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .26$ ).

#### 4.5. Hypothesis 5: Social relation to the tutor

The type of politeness strategy in the utterances had a large effect on the participant's judgments concerning their social relation to the tutor,  $F(1, 80) = 45.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .36$ : In line with hypothesis 5, participants reading polite utterances judged the tutor as significantly more likable ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ) than when reading bald utterances ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ).

	Experimental condition			
	Negative politeness		Bald/on record	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Revised Instructional Face-Support Scale</i>				
Positive face work	3.53	0.48	3.17	0.49
Negative face work	3.58	0.35	2.99	0.37
<i>Recipient Orientation Scale</i>				
Audience design	3.61	0.32	3.56	0.41
Tutor's knowledge and commitment	3.54	0.35	3.49	0.40
Emotional evaluation	3.63	0.39	3.42	0.41
<i>Credibility Scales</i>				
Competence	3.85	0.32	3.91	0.38
Trustworthiness	3.91	0.31	3.75	0.44
Goodwill	3.89	0.41	3.43	0.51
<i>Comprehensibility Inventory</i>				
Simplicity	3.90	0.33	3.83	0.43
Structure	3.71	0.39	3.64	0.50
Conciseness	3.57	0.26	3.79	0.29
Additional Stimulation	3.75	0.64	3.02	0.82
<i>Likeability</i>	3.79	0.56	3.20	0.59

**Table 1: Winsorized Means and Standard Deviations of the Dependent Variables in the Two Experimental Conditions**

## **5. Discussion**

The current study examined the effect of tutors' politeness on the perception of recipients in online communication. Recipients received either tutorial moves uttered bald/on record or redressed using negative politeness. They evaluated the utterances with respect to perceived face work, communication style, credibility, comprehensibility and likeability.

The results concerning the first hypothesis showed that the manipulation was successful: When tutors employed negative politeness, they were perceived as providing more face work than in the bald/on record condition. Participants however did not differentiate between positive and negative face work. Both aspects were rated higher in the polite condition. While the RIFS was originally designed for face-to-face situations, for participants who themselves were the addressees of face work and who had a greater social distance to their teacher than was the case in our peer-tutoring situation (Kerssen-Griep/Trees/Hess 2008; Kerssen-Griep/Hess/Trees 2003; Trees/Kerssen-Griep/Hess 2009), it was shown to be applicable in settings like ours. Regarding recipient orientation, only the emotional evaluation subscale revealed significant differences. This could be attributed to the shortness of dialogue sequences that made it difficult to process these aspects properly. In our previous study, using whole discourses rather than single utterances, we also found differences for the audience design scale but no effect for the commitment scale (Jucks/Brummernhenrich/Päuler in press).

We found large effects for the Credibility Scale's subscales goodwill and trustworthiness, being, as predicted, rated higher when uttered politely. Our findings are in line with those of Witt and Kerssen-Griep (2011), who found that students perceived instructors as more credible when they employed face-threat mitigation.

Contrary to previous results (Jessmer/Anderson 2001), there were no differences for the competence subscale. We similarly did not find an effect of politeness on perceived competence in our previous study (Jucks/Brummernhenrich/Päuler in press). In both cases participants were unfamiliar with the subject matter and thus could have been unable to judge this dimension. Two subscales of the comprehensibility inventory revealed significant differences: conciseness and additional stimulation. Conciseness was rated higher for bald utterances. Unfortunately, the dialogue sequences containing the utterances to be rated differed in length between conditions. Thus, this result might merely reflect that fact, even though participants were reminded to assess only a single utterance which we highlighted in the text. Additional stimulation was considered higher for the negative politeness condition; this could be ascribed to the same reason. Alternatively, politeness might have had a stimulating effect on recipients, which would be interesting to investigate further. As expected, politeness had a positive effect on perceptions of the tutors' likeability.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

In the current study, we investigated only a restricted range of politeness strategies. To generalise findings, future research should extend its scope to adequately assess the role of politeness in tutoring. Positive politeness as well as the fact that utterances can contain more than one politeness strategy at once should be taken into account. Additionally, the sociological variables *social distance* and *relative power*, as postulated by Brown/Levinson (1987), could be varied.

In our study, we did not account for the influence of the tutees' communicative behaviour on the tutors' utterances. The discursive

nature of politeness in tutoring could be an interesting topic for future research.

The results concerning comprehensibility differed from our expectations. It could be argued that the usage of the comprehensibility inventory was not suited to our setting. We had to leave out or modify several items and did not test the new version.

This research focused on tutoring in a chat context. Comparisons of tutors' choice of politeness strategies in different media settings could be illuminating as it has been in other contexts (Duthler 2006).

While the findings of our study are in line with previous research and indicate mostly positive effects of politeness, the literature showing detrimental effects on clarity and explicitness cannot be discounted. A key task for future research in this field will be to find communicative strategies that allow tutors to create a motivating atmosphere without jeopardising the learning outcome.

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