

POLITENESS IN BUSINESS LETTERS

Alexander HOLLINGER

Introduction

Business letters are mostly persuasive, that is the writer wants to convey a certain message to the recipient and thereby make him take a certain course of action. To supply an example, an offer is written in the hope of convincing the offeree to place the order with the offeror. One of the persuasion strategies used by writers of business correspondence is politeness. Authors of correspondence books have referred to the rule of the 3C's, implying that a business letter should be clear, concise and courteous (Eckersley and Kaufmann 1970: 14-27).

This article deals with the significance of politeness as it comes out from works on pragmatics and illustrates different aspects, especially the language choices for expressing polite requests, making polite complaints, as well as writing courteous adjustments.

Defining politeness

According to one approach, politeness is “the means employed to show awareness of another person’s face” (Yule 1998: 60). The same source defines *face* as “the public self-image of a person.” Another source sees face as “the freedom to act unimpeded as well as the satisfaction of having one’s values approved” (Brown

and Levinson 1987). Politeness has also been defined as “any behavior whereby a person shows regard for another person by trying to make that person feel comfortable or by making an obvious effort to avoid making that person feel uncomfortable.” (Green, 1996: 148)

The two approaches I have referred to are in fact complementary. Both stress that the feeling of the other person in an interaction, should be spared. If someone’s feelings or their public self-image is threatened this can be interpreted as a *face threatening act*. To avoid their losing face, a *face saving act* is required. I shall illustrate this by means of sentences used in business letters which point out that a mistake has been made during a transaction

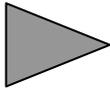
- a. *We are sorry you misinterpreted our instructions.*
- b. *We are sorry the instructions in our catalogue were not entirely clear.*

Example **a** can be termed a face threatening act as it implies that the recipient of the instructions is stupid, unable to interpret the catalogue correctly. Such a formulation will be avoided by a writer of a business letter. On the other hand example **b** can be seen as a face saving act, as the writer assumes responsibility for the error, thus avoiding to offend the other party. Such a strategy, which is an act of politeness, is a way of avoiding conflict and of continuing business relations.

A distinction has been made between formal politeness which has as its main rule: “Do not impose on others” and a less formal one that has as its rule: “offer options” (Lakoff 1973: 293). The same source mentions friendly or intimate politeness as being formulated in this way: “encourage feelings of camaraderie.”

Another approach sees politeness achieved either in a context of social distance, called the *negative face of someone* or in a context of closeness called the *positive face of someone* (Yule 1998: 60 -70). A person’s negative is his/her need not to be imposed on by others. On the other hand a person’s positive face expresses his/her need to be accepted / liked, to have his/her wants shared by others. The two approaches I have mentioned here can be somehow linked to the ones described in the previous paragraph. Thus formal politeness is somewhat close to the negative face. Someone using it will express respect, deference, for the other person, in other words will take pains to use strategies and the adequate linguistic formulations to point out that we do not impose, that we leave the options free to our correspondent. As for the positive face of someone this is linked with more

intimate politeness, fostering a feeling of being closely connected with the other party in the written interaction, which will be illustrated further down.



Politeness in business correspondence

As a preliminary remark, politeness in business letter writing involves taking into account the correspondent's feelings. Therefore the language used should always avoid any choice of words that might be face-threatening. Any reply to a letter received should express thanks for the previous correspondence in the very first paragraph. Whenever possible you should express your pleasure for having received some written communication from your business partner, and invite him not to hesitate contacting you if necessary. As a rule any letter should be replied to on the day it is received. This is a means to keep up communication and at the same time a politeness strategy.

□ Making polite requests

In order to highlight different ways of expressing politeness in business correspondence, I shall first consider examples of requests made in business letters and point out what linguistic forms are used to achieve the proposed strategy. The given examples will be linked with comments on the degree of politeness whenever this seems relevant.

a. "As the margin on the order is very small we *hope* you *can* allow us the extra discount of 5%".

Notice that the insertion of "hope" is a politeness strategy, a mitigation of the request for a reduction in the price.

The writer shows that he/she does not want to impose, and this effect is also heightened by the use of the modal "can."

b. "We want to show your book ... in a special window display and should be *glad* if you *would* send us 6 show cards".

The use of a complex clause to express a request is also a politeness strategy as it shows the writer's desire to be more explicit and avoid discourteous brief formulations that might imply lack of deference for the other party in the written interaction. Moreover the use of the modal "would" as well as of the word "glad"

are also devices to make one's communication partner feel at ease, therefore he feels the writer is polite, there is no pressure put on him.

c. "If you have any other suitable material that you can supply we shall be *most grateful*."

Again we notice the use of complex sentences to mitigate the request, to avoid making it seem discourteous. The use of the adjective "grateful" in the superlative also adds to the feeling of one's being deferential to one's communication partner.

d. "I would be *grateful* if you *could* send me a copy of your latest brochure."

The italicized words above are also illustrative of the politeness strategy (similar to those in example **b**).

e. "*Perhaps* you *could* wire us whether you can supply on these terms."

The adverb "perhaps" as well as the modal "could" should be seen as elements used to mitigate the request, therefore a politeness strategy.

f. "*Would it be possible* for me to have half a dozen units of each kit in approval, before placing a firm order?"

g. *May we suggest* that you should send us your instructions as soon as possible?

These are other instances of avoiding a blunt request by using a mitigating phrase, such as the italicized ones.

□ **Complaining**

After examining a few strategies and linguistic choices for polite requests, let us now turn to polite expressions used in making complaints or in debt collection letters, which also express a complaint. Consider the following examples:

a. "*There appears to be an error* in the statement."

b. "*The mistake must be corrected* as soon as possible."

c. "On unpacking I found that *six mahogany-finished dressing tables had been sent* instead of..."

d. "We are writing concerning the outstanding October *account which should have been cleared* last month."

Three of the statements above are from complaint letters, the last one being from a debt collection letter, the function of which is to express a complaint about an overdue account. The politeness strategy used in all four examples is that of writing

in an impersonal tone, by using the passive voice or another impersonal structure to indicate the reason for complaint, without being discourteous or offending. There is no personal reproach, as the mistake is depersonalized, thus avoiding placing the recipient on the defensive or antagonizing them.

Here are two more examples taken from complaint letters:

- e. "It is *with great regret* that we have to tell you that your last delivery was not up to the usual standards."
- f. "We *regret* to inform you that one of the cases of your consignment arrived in a badly damaged condition."

In the examples above, the writer has used the word "regret", either as a verb or as a noun, as a mitigating device.

Expressing regret

When rejecting a complaint, or turning down a request / an offer, a polite strategy is to use mitigating words to express regret for being unable to comply with the demand.

e.g. "We *regret*, therefore, that at least for the present we cannot make use of your offer."

In letters of adjustment, when the mistake is acknowledged, a phrase or a word expressing an apology or regret is used, for the sake of making the letter more polite, and thus avoid damaging one's business reputation. The noun "apology" or the verb "apologize" stand out in the following examples.

- a. "We *hasten to offer our sincere apologies* for this mistake..."
- b. "We are *sorry* about the inconvenience it has caused you."
- c. "Please accept our *apologies* for the trouble caused by this error."
- d. "We *apologize sincerely* for the position in which we have put you."

Creating a positive face

So far I have looked at what has been called the negative face, in other words a more formal style of politeness. I shall further illustrate what is more closely linked to a positive face, to a feeling of closeness between the two parties in the written business interaction. Consider the following examples:

- a. An example from a letter to an old customer who has placed a new order with your company:

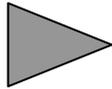
"It is always a pleasure to hear from an old friend again"

Two more examples include both elements of informal and formal politeness.

b. “We were impressed by your display of office furniture”

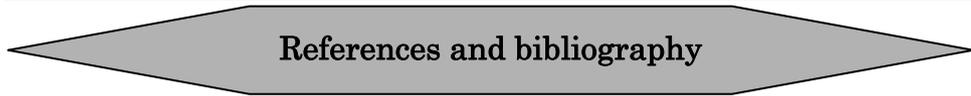
c. “Enjoy the catalogue. It is designed for your pleasure. Enjoy the ease of making your selection in any of Hahn’s eight stores. Enjoy the extra convenience of saying <<Charge it please>>.”

The stress in these examples from different business letters is on the correspondent’s feeling at ease as well as on a feeling of closer relationship between the two parties.



Conclusion

In my experience of teaching business-letter writing, I have often seen students producing letters that sound rather discourteous, due to abrupt formulations, the use of informal or colloquial language, inappropriate vocabulary and short forms. This derives not only from their being unaware of the importance of courtesy in business writing, but also of the specific politeness strategies. Some years ago I had a confirmation of a similar experience being shared by German teachers of English business-letter writing when I took part in a debate on such matters in an international BESIG conference. In this light, I hope my considerations in this article will be useful in offering support to younger teachers, who could find suggestions for a teaching approach to business correspondence based on raising their students’ awareness of the specific politeness strategies and formulas conducive to the writing of successful business letters.



References and bibliography

Brown, P. and S. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness* Cambridge: CUP.

Eckersley, C. and W. Kaufmann. 1970. *English and American Business Letters*
London: Longman.

- Green, G.** 1996. *Pragmatics and Natural Language Understanding* Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Lakoff, R.** 1973. "The Logic of Politeness" in *Claudia Corum* Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Yule, G.** 1998. *Pragmatics* Oxford: OUP.
- Ashley, A.** 1992. *A Handbook of Commercial Correspondence* Oxford: OUP.

The author

Alexander Hollinger is a Professor of Business English at the Department of Germanic Languages in the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, where he has been teaching since 1967. He holds a Ph.D. in Philology from the University of Bucharest and has authored and co-authored many textbooks of business, financial and accounting English. Main titles: *A Lexicological Approach to Business and Financial English*, 2005, Editura Universitara, *Test Your Business English Vocabulary*, 2004, Teora Publishing House, *Contributions to a Genre Analysis of Business Letters*, 2005, Cavallioti Publishing House.