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5.- Solidarity and deference in Spanish computer-mediated communication: A discourse-pragmatic analysis of students' emails to lecturers¹

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1. Introduction

In the last twenty-five years, text-based computer mediated communication (henceforth CMC) has gained in importance the world over and gone beyond the early boundaries of government and academic contexts. Despite the fact that CMC consists almost exclusively of language, linguists have been slow to consider CMC discourse as a legitimate object of inquiry. Consequently, there's little agreement governing CMC research practices (Herring 1996a).

Some researchers argued in the past that electronic communication was useless for interactional and interpersonal purposes and that CMC was mainly information-oriented. This paper proves that this is not always the case and suggests that these statements be always made relative to a particular context. The paper focuses on the analysis of University student-initiated electronic messages sent to a Lecturer and aims to gain insights into the organisation and discourse choices common in the electronic interactions that take place within this community of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992). The purpose is to consider this type of CMC as a sociolinguistic phenomenon where interpersonal features occupy an important place (Yus 2001). To this end, the goal of the messages, their internal structure and, most importantly, the

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linguistic means used to express solidarity and deference are taken into account (Garcés-Conejos & Sánchez-Macarro 1998). Although much has been said about the lack of politeness in electronic communication, the data show the importance of the social and interpersonal level of communication and how students carry out facework in addressing a lecturer. The interpersonal rhetoric of messages is dealt with in terms of the politeness strategies considered by their users as appropriate to the interaction at hand within a given community of practice (Brown & Levinson 1987; Fraser 1990; Fraser & Nolen 1981; Garcés Conejos 1995; Scollon & Scollon 1995; Mills 2003).

The results contribute to our understanding of several practical and theoretical issues. First, the study sheds light on the internal organization of messages and the expression of solidarity and deference within a specific community of practice deploying a specific medium. Second, this empirical discourse-pragmatic approach informs theoretical claims as regards politeness and communities of practice. Finally, the results help us revisit some generalized hypotheses found in CMC research, i.e. the similarity between electronic language and speech, the alleged uselessness of emails for interpersonal communication and the building of virtual communities.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Computer-mediated communication

Early research into computer-mediated communication observed distancing features of text-only electronic interaction, such as lack of access to intonation cues, identity or mood of interlocutors, and concluded that this type of communication, while suitable for the transfer of information, was highly unsuitable for personal relationships. However, in those days there was more speculation than empirical research. By the late nineties this assumption was already being challenged in different electronic types of interaction (see Herring 1996a).

For instance, Herring (1996b) analysed electronic messages posted in two academic discussion groups and found that, apart from contributing their views, most participants incorporated interpersonal features. Similarly, Collot & Belmore (1996) found great degrees of involvement in the electronic language of Bulletin Board Systems. These findings led Herring (1996b: 104) to conclude that “the era since the advent of computer networks might better be termed the ‘Interaction Age’ rather than the ‘Information Age’, since it is in the potential for interaction with others that the primary appeal of computer networks appears to lie.”

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Despite the current acknowledgement of the presence and/or importance of interpersonal aspects in electronic interactions, these have not been sufficiently studied. In the first place, there are different modes of electronic participation and more research is needed into how these genres work interpersonally and into the differences and similarities between them. Secondly, CMC users are still reportedly impolite and this may be due to the fact that these environments are relatively new and in constant change, thus hindering the development of conventions for the appropriate display of socio-emotional needs.

In a recent paper, Morand & Ocker (2002) propose Politeness Theory as a suitable tool for researching interpersonal aspects of CMC. Their study is firmly grounded in Brown & Levinson's (1987) work. These researchers illustrate several linguistic politeness strategies with examples taken from the electronic medium. New and original as their proposal is, this study is highly decontextualized and the authors fail to explain the use of the different linguistic means in terms of the social relationship that holds between co-participants in the interaction given specific social requirements; furthermore, the reader ignores what type of electronic interaction is being subjected to analysis and, therefore, also what social aspects from the local context constrain the interaction.

2.2. Politeness

To my knowledge, a linguistic politeness framework has never been used to analyse discourse choices in terms of social relations and requirements within a specific type of electronic interaction. Although I agree with Morand & Ocker (2002) in enhancing a politeness approach for this end, this paper differs from the former in its conceptualisation of politeness and its empirical methodology. This paper works under the assumption that face-saving is essential in human communication and that it remains so in the type of electronic communication under study. The inventory of face-oriented sociolinguistic strategies identified by Brown & Levinson (1987) will serve as an initial guide for the analysis of the data.

In this paper, linguistic politeness is understood not just in terms of linguistic strategies used, among other things, to save co-participants' face in a particular social domain, but also as nuanced discourse choices, linguistic patterns, perceived by participants as *appropriate* to the current interactional requirements of the activity in which they are engaged. (Brown & Levinson 1987; Fraser 1990; Fraser & Nolen 1981; Garcés Conejos 1995; Scollon & Scollon 1995; Mills 2003).

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Thus, this paper proposes what can be termed a *broad* framework of linguistic politeness (for a narrower view of politeness from a pragmalinguistic perspective see Briz 2003). Politeness is seen to respond to human's social needs and is explanatory of discourse choices in social interaction. Although it pervades communication and generally aims at maintaining interactional harmony and oiling the wheels of social intercourse, this is not always an end in itself. Polite discursive patterns can be used for other instrumental ends such as the maximisation of pragmatic efficiency or the attainment of some specific goal (compliance-gaining in requests or, in general, the elicitation of a preferred second part of any adjacency pair) (Garcés-Conejos 1995; Coupland et al. 1988; Briz 2003). These same polite discourse choices can further be used for impoliteness (Mills 2003). Moreover, politeness and impoliteness are negotiated and interpreted in interaction and must always be evaluated in context for their social adequacy (Fraser 1990).

Additionally, this pragmatic standpoint attempts to be social, cognitive and discursive. It is social to the extent that politeness has developed into a commonplace framework for social interaction suitable for investigations into the relationship between society and language. Cognition and metarepresentation are essential within this framework since, for any individual, social and linguistic aspects become related in the individual's mind or social cognition, and it is an individual's perception, assumptions and mental processes that will determine the way in which language and society interact (Van Dijk 1997; Sperber & Wilson 1995; Escandell-Vidal 1998). Mental metarepresentations become public in discourse, and therefore, it is discourse in context that politeness researchers should analyse.

Prior empirical work that adopts a discourse-politeness approach to the analysis of specific genres or speech events constitute antecedents to my study. Just to mention a few, Garcés-Conejos & Sánchez-Macarro (1998) adopt a politeness approach to the study of scientific texts, while Gómez-Morón, (1998) deals with linguistic and academic genres. In order to analyse politeness in discourse these authors have used discursive notions such as activity type, genre or speech event. This paper uses the social construct 'community of practice'.

2.3. *Communities of practice*

The concept 'community of practice' (henceforth, CofP) offers a rich, dynamic and flexible tool for the study of the interaction of language and society and, therefore, for studies of linguistic politeness (Eckert &

McConnell-Ginet 1992). The CofP perspective focuses on the activities, the practices, in which members of the community engage and through which they define themselves as members of the group to different degrees. This notion is specially appealing for this study in three respects. Firstly, the mutual endeavour in which members engage involves regular interaction which, over time, produces “a shared repertoire of negotiable resources” (Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999: 175). These resources or ways of doing things include discursive patterns within that CofP; therefore this approach facilitates the study of politeness in discourse within a social group engaged in a particular activity (Mills 2003). Secondly, in engaging in new practices, co-participants learn the corresponding practice-specific sociolinguistic competence. This underlines “the progressive nature of a CofP [which] means that individual membership in a CofP will differ” (Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999: 176). Finally, this notion allows for studies at the macro and micro levels of analysis which is of special interest to our contextual study of the goal, internal organisation and linguistic choices in a particular type of CMC.

This framework then, while assembling a group of people who define themselves through their practices, allows for individual variation at a given time and for variation in the performance of one individual over time. The CofP perspective emerges as especially suitable for our purposes.

3. Data and methodology

3.1. Data

The study of CMC is based on a compilation of 30 emails sent by Spanish university (current or former) students to me in my capacity as a University lecturer. The emails were naturally/spontaneously generated, that is, they are naturally occurring discourse as opposed to elicited discursive data. The students were contacted and granted permission for use of the data for research purposes. All emails contained requests of the lecturer and expected an answer. Therefore they are student-initiated interactions which await a response. However, given the asynchronous character of CMC, all the emails constitute apparently complete interactions in the sense that they often contain moves such as initial greetings or final farewells. In this respect, this type of electronic discourse resembles letters, epistolary communication, in which initiating moves requiring reactions that are necessarily postponed, are embedded within framing sequences that open and close the said interaction (cf Herring 1996b).

The data was collected over a period of eight months, from June 2003 to February 2004. The corpus was divided into four sections:

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(i) Group A: Students in their first year, asking their teacher for information usually related to their grades. Eight messages constitute this group characterized by the fact that, in all cases, there is a relationship with the teacher, at least during classes. Also, in all cases the messages constitute the first electronic contact with the teacher.

(ii) Group B: Students in their final years, who may not have been taught by the recipient teacher, and who requested information about the External Practice coordinated by me. Five messages are included in this group, in which the type of relationship with the teacher is more varied, since we may or may not have interacted previously.

(iii) Group C: This contains eleven messages from PhD students. All but two are known to me, of these, one is working abroad and another is doing her PhD in a different University.

(iv) Finally, group D is made of six messages sent by current and former students in my college asking for information about a seminar I organized in November 2003.

3.2 Methodology

Since any type of CMC is shaped by the context in which it takes place (Herring 2003), and our final aim is to relate social aspects of CMC with discourse choices in terms of politeness, the first step was to study the local academic context within which students' electronic discourse takes place. The discourse object of analysis is the practice common to all the senders, the community of students, who also engage in other practices common to them such as interactions with their teachers as a joint group during the class or as a small-group or individually in face-to-face interactions at the end of classes or during tutorials. This global context will account, in general terms, for the discourse means identified in the analysis, the resources used by this CofP. For further detailed explanations, we resorted to more local, sociological differences among the four groups of data

The second step was to consider the goal of the interaction which, in all cases, was to formulate a request from the lecturer. Requests are considered face threatening acts that need some type of redress. Moreover, the fact that social relations within this context are institutionalized and there is a power imbalance, makes this type of requesting action specially suitable for the surfacing of interpersonal features.

Next in the analysis was the identification of discourse segments that would account for the internal organisation of messages. Our unit of analysis is the

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sequence understood functionally, for the social action it enacts in discourse. Thus, though similar to the sequences used to describe the organization of actions in Conversational Analysis, our sequence is not, obviously, a sequence of turns at talk-in-interaction but sequences of actions. (Schegloff 1999). In spite of this, this unit has been chosen because its validity in explaining the internal structure of interactions has been widely attested (Schegloff & Sacks 1973; among others). We also thought that given that electronic language is unlike writing and speech but is considered a new variety in itself (Collot & Belmore 1996), it would be interesting, and hopefully fruitful, to apply a unit typical of oral interaction to the analysis of written CMC.

Sequences are discursive and dialogic/interactional. The three main sequences in our corpus are the opening, the requesting and the closing sequences. The framing sequences, openings and closings, start and end the social encounter, both are highly ritualistic and are more interpersonally than informationally oriented. The content sequences, requesting, deal with information but, as we shall see, interpersonal politeness plays an important role.

The recurrent moves within each sequence were identified and assessed for their social value. Opening sequences contained *greetings*, which were highly ritualistic but displayed interesting and different degrees of formality towards the receiver, and *self-identifications*. These are necessary moves where senders prove to be aware of the social context in this CofP. In it, there is a large number of students and teachers do not always learn their names. Therefore, students would identify themselves not just by name and surname but also by providing further information to aid recognition or at least place the sender in a more local context.

Request sequences contained more creative moves. In order to analyse these larger sequences we resorted to Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) study of requests and identified *request strategies* and *request support*. The request strategies that appeared in our corpus were the *Query preparatory*, where the sender formulates a request by querying any of the preparatory conditions, the *Want statement*, where the requester formulates a need or wish, the *Mood Derivable*, where requests are realised through imperatives or questions, and the *Hedged performative*, where a performative verb is used.

Although closing sequences are also, in part, ritualistic, they were found to be much more complex than the openings, maybe because parting is a more delicate social endeavour. Recurring moves within the closings were the *Leave-taking*, where again different formulas were found as regards formality,

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the *Thanking*, where senders expressed their gratitude for the receiver's time and/or, also sometimes, for the future granting of the request; and the *Signature*, a very common move of an epistolary nature. Other far less frequent moves were the *Apologizing*, the *Self-identification* and the *Post-script*.

Once the different sequences and moves that account for the internal organization of the data were identified, the next step was to analyse the discourse patterns used to accomplish each sequence/move. Discourse choices are seen in terms of politeness strategies, a view adequate for the explanation of the type of social relation that holds among co-participants as well as for highlighting the important social nature of this CMC and for commenting on the expression of solidarity and deference. (Brown & Levinson 1987; Scollon & Scollon 1995; Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos 2003).

4. Context and goal of messages

The larger context in which the data is embedded is related to the academic world, where different CofPs interact. In our case, the CofP is made up of students and lecturers.

Social relations in lecturer-student interaction are asymmetrical as regards power. The obvious power imbalance makes the teacher the dominant figure while students hold the non-dominant role. However, in their study of the discourse of teachers, Garcés and Torreblanca (1997) indicate that the said imbalance reflects the overt power of the teacher provided by the institution. Furthermore, they argue, there is another type of power, which they call covert, held by students. After all, the institution would not work without students, and teachers could do no teaching without them.

Power relations are usually carried over from the outer world into the internet (Herring 2003). Undoubtedly, CMC is just one form of communication, so social relations are expected to 'continue' as they were before the electronic contact. In what follows, the way this complex social context and the electronic medium constrain linguistic choices is analysed.

As regards the goal of messages, all the interactions in our corpus are initiated because they have an instrumental purpose or goal: to make a request. Mainly, these are requests for information although a few are requests for action. As we shall see, each different sequence has a different social purpose or goal. But since the request is the reason to initiate the interaction in the first place, this is considered as the main purpose. Requests are rapport-sensitive acts (Spencer-Oatey 2001) which can be perceived and produced as face-threatening and/or face-enhancing, depending on the specific circumstances

surrounding it and the object of the request. They are face-threatening to the extent that they require some reaction from the receiver and thus they impose on his or her freedom of action. But requests may also be rapport-enhancing in the sense that they may show that the person who makes the request wants, values, admires and/or is interested in something the speaker has (objects, information, opinion, advice, etc). In either case, the sender will choose politeness strategies to formulate the request appropriately in the given context (Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch 2003).

5. Internal organisation and politeness choices

The analysis of the data revealed a clearly-delimited internal structure common to nearly all messages. The structure consisted of three different sequences: all but two messages had an *opening*; while *requesting* and *closing* were common to all messages with no exception. The three sequences are interactional and have an initiating nature similar to the first part of an adjacency pair, that is, they await a relevant response (Schegloff & Sacks 1973). However, due to the asynchronous nature of email communication, the sequences containing initiating moves are not followed by adjacent responses, but will receive delayed (asynchronous) reactions. In this sense, we may call our larger analytic category ‘interactional asynchronous sequence’. In a responding message, the new sender (former receiver) is expected to react to the prior opening, to the request and to the closing. The messages, to the extent that they are not immediately followed by a reaction from the co-participant then, are self-contained and constitute complete initiating interactions. The sender is aware of this situation and may display in the discourse such an awareness and, for example, anticipate some reactions by the receiver, as is the case when the sender thanks the receiver in advance for a potential granting of the request.

5.1. Opening sequences

Opening sequences emerge as essential from the interpersonal point of view. It is during the opening stages of any social encounter that the social relation among co-participants is negotiated and established. Obviously, social relations should not be considered fixed since there is always the possibility of renegotiating them. However, in asynchronous communication there is no possibility of immediate feedback and the sender may be in a more risky and delicate position than a speaker who initiates a face-to-face or telephone interaction. The sender, therefore, has to go on record as to how s/he views

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his/her social relation with the receiver. Any negotiation of politeness and social roles is necessarily postponed and the sender, who has non-dominant status, is left alone in the communication of social meanings until s/he receives a message accepting or negotiating them. Openings, then, are delicate interactional moves. In the 30 messages, there were 28 opening sequences which contained *greetings* (25/28)² and *self-identifications* (21/30).

The *greeting* was often the first move in the message and it usually included a formal or informal formula followed by a direct address of the receiver. The greeting itself is a move of great social significance, since, through it, the participant shows an interest in the receiver, begins to seek common ground and decides on the degree of politeness to be used.

In our corpus, most *greetings* were realised by discourse patterns expressing informality, involvement and solidarity. Senders used linguistic devices that would emphasize the fact that both co-participants belonged to the same CofP. In-group identity markers such as informal greeting and use of the receiver's first name underlie the apparent familiarity between co-participants; this may be explained, mainly, because in most cases there was frequent contact between students attending classes and the lecturer, or because students were not in their first year and were already aware that formal uses are rarely deployed towards most lecturers (examples 1 and 2). Less common, and found nearly half as much in the corpus, are discourse patterns oriented to the expression of independence, deference and respect. More specifically, the use of formal ritualistic greetings and use of receiver's name and surname emphasize the formality and distance among participants (examples 3 and 4). On a few occasions, the greeting combined a distancing formula with the familiarity of the use of receiver's first name (examples 5, 6 and 7).

[1] "Hola *Name*" (A1); [2] "Hola" (D6)

[3] "Estimada *Name Surname*" (D1); [4] "Buenos días" (A5)

[5] Buenas tardes *Name* (B4); [6] "Estimada *Name*" (C7);

[7] "Querida *Name*" (D2)

² During the analysis, the number of occurrences of a unit (sequence, move, strategy) will be indicated in brackets sometimes followed by the number of total units or messages in the corpus. In this case, (21/28) means that 21 greetings were found in the 28 opening sequences of the corpus.

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A closer look at the students who expressed greater deference revealed that all but one were unknown to the lecturer³. Lack of familiarity and perceived social distance account for most cases of independence or negative politeness strategies. One case, however, requires special attention. The lecturer and the student knew each other and had often held conversations. However, this time the lecturer had to judge his MA dissertation and he was addressing her as a member of the tribunal because he needed a delay on the appointed day of the public reading. The degree of imposition of the request, in this case, was greater. And that may explain the formal opening of this message which, otherwise, in all probability, would have been more informal.

The greater informality and familiarity in the greetings is mirrored in the second opening move: *the self-identification*. The most common strategy used by students consisted in emphasizing their common ground with the sender; students anticipated that often, self-identification by name and surname is not enough for the lecturer to recognize them given the amount of students per class, and thus noticed the need to provide further information that would place them in a more specific role relationship with the lecturer (examples 8 through 11). Other strategies of involvement or positive politeness used by students included use of T-pronoun, *tu*, (examples 8 and 10) and first name or even nicknames for themselves (example 8).

Independence or negative politeness strategies in the self-identification were less common and included the use of the V-pronoun, *usted*, (examples 9 and 11) and use of impersonalization through avoidance of their own name and through generic nouns for self-identification (examples 9 and 11). *Tu/usted* choice is studied in more detail in the next section.

[8] “Somos *Name, Nickname, Name y Name* de tu clase de inglés 1” (A6)

[9] “Buenos días, soy *Name Surname*, alumna suya de lengua inglesa I del grupo C” (A5)

[10] “Hola *Lecturer’s First Name*. Soy *Name Surname*. Has sido mi tutora de prácticas, y ya te entregué la memoria en Abril” (B1)

[11] “Soy una antigua alumna: *Name Surname1 Surname2*. Usted fue mi profesora tutora de las prácticas externas de Filología Inglesa en el año 2000.”(B3)

While the presence of moves has great social significance along with the discursive patterns used to realize them, the absence of certain moves is also a

³ In my University, class attendance is not compulsory and there are large numbers of students in class. Therefore, it is not uncommon for a lecturer not to know some of her students.

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social and discursive option to be taken into account. The data contained three opening sequences with no greeting at all (examples 8 and 11 above). This is an option that allows the sender to avoid the 'difficult' situation of choosing form of address, among other things (Bargiela et al 2002). Another six opening sequences lacked self-identification moves. Of these, three were sent by students who were well known to the lecturer; more familiarity, therefore, ensued and self-identification was not a point in case. Two messages contained this move during the closing sequence, before the final signature. And, finally, only one student who didn't identify him/herself was (and still is) unknown to the lecturer, a possibility s/he may or may not have anticipated but which results in great social distance. This student belongs to the group of those who requested information about the seminar, and, since the seminar was open to all students in college, s/he may not have considered anonymity offensive or disrespectful in any way.

In sum, the most common discourse patterns in the opening sequences were oriented towards the expression of involvement and solidarity. This can be explained by the fact that in class and during tutorials the lecturer's relationship with students is carried out on a first-name basis and great efforts are made to create a relaxed and participative atmosphere. Furthermore, this is usually the typical social relation between students and most lecturers where use of t-pronouns and first names enhance solidarity without necessarily implying disrespect. It is not surprising, then, that most current and former students choose to address their lecturer using her first name and to create a general atmosphere of common interests and objectives, of involvement and solidarity. In sum, an atmosphere which enhances the existence of a common endeavor within the CofP.

5.2. Requesting sequences

Requesting sequences were generally longer and always less ritualistic than opening sequences and were found in all 30 messages. In fact, there was a total of 32 requests since one message contained three different requests. Taken as a whole, discourse patterns oriented towards the expression of distance and deference doubled the number of discursive devices that conveyed closeness and informality. These results contrast with those obtained for opening sequences where the environment was more often familiar and informal. However, rather than considering results contradictory they can be regarded as complementary. On the one hand, opening and requesting sequences have

different social functions. On the other, neither informality nor familiarity necessarily exclude respect.

Request sequences, as mentioned above, were divided into *request strategies*, i.e. the move that most clearly conveys the request proper, and *request support*, i.e. the move(s) that prepare the ground for the request, or mitigate its impact, etc. Following Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) taxonomy of request strategies, in our corpus the *Query preparatory* (12/32) and the *Want statement* (12/32) strategies account for the formulation of most requests. These conventional formulations of the request contained mostly linguistic structures that implied that senders were making minimal assumptions about the possibility of the sender granting the request, and giving options to the interlocutor not to do the act. These devices act as distancing mechanisms that mitigate and hedge the request.

[12] “Te agradecería muchísimo si me pudieras ayudar” (C8)

[13] “Si fuera posible me gustaría que me dijera si podríamos posponer la entrevista para otro día” (A5)

Example 12 shows a request formulated through a *Query preparatory* strategy, in which the sender questions one of the preparatory conditions on requests: that the person requested to do something *can* do it. Linguistic devices include conditional and subjunctive forms of verbs and an if-clause. The sender also expresses gratitude and is aware of incurring a debt. Therefore the request is performed with deference mainly through strategies of independence. This does not exclude the deployment of certain mechanisms of familiarity scattered through the message such as the pronoun *tu*, of solidarity, or the informal exaggeration in *muchísimo*. As previous empirical discourse research has shown, the expression of deference does not exclude the use of solidarity markers, and viceversa (Garcés Conejos 1995). In example 13, we have a case of the *Want statement* strategy, which includes devices such as use of if-clauses, of the subjunctive, of hypothetical verbs as well as of *usted*, the pronoun of deference.

The more direct *Mood derivable* strategy (6/32), where the request meaning can be directly inferred from the mood of the verb, also recurred in the corpus. Again, these were formulated with deference as can be seen in example 14, where the imperative is prefaced by the conventional and formal *por favor*. Through these, the sender recognizes the debt derived from the request. We also found use of maximizing hedges and justifications for the urgency conveyed in the request. Example 15 displays similar devices but, whereas in 14 the student uses *tu*, the student of 15 deploys the more deferential *usted*.

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[14] “por favor, contesta lo antes posible para que podamos empezar a hacer el trabajo” (A6)

[15] “Por favor, confirmeme vía e-mail que no ha habido problemas y lo ha recibido usted” (C4)

Only two requests were realised through *Hedged performative* strategies (2/28) and the same distancing mechanisms were found to prevail.

Request support moves revealed a large amount of discursive politeness patterns. Those expressing deference outnumbered solidarity-expressing patterns and occurred over twice as often in the corpus. The most common, like in the *Request strategies*, were directed to making minimal assumptions about the interlocutor’s ability and willingness to do the requested act. Next in frequency of use were the negative politeness strategies of apologizing by justifying and giving reasons for the request together with the positive politeness strategy of claiming common ground and noticing the receiver’s need for more information in order to understand the request. This latter use, to the extent that it may lead the interlocutor to ‘forgive/oversee’ the imposition, also has a negative-politeness quality. Also frequent in the corpus were impersonalization mechanisms. Other less frequent devices included deference-oriented nominalizations and imposition minimizers, and solidarity-oriented presuppositions of common ground and exaggerations. To illustrate complete request sequences (strategy and support) the third example from each of the four sections of the corpus has been chosen.

[16]⁴ “EL PROBLEMA QUE TENGO ES QUE EN LAS LISTAS DE JUNIO SALIA QUE LA TEORICA ESTABA APROBADA CON USTED PERO LA PRACTICA CON *NAME SURNAME* LA TENÍA SUSPENDIDA, POR LO QUE ME DEBERÍA SALIR SUSPENSO, PERO EN CAMBIO EN LAS LISTAS DEFINITIVAS SALE NO PRESENTADO. [PODRIA HACER EL FAVOR DE REPASARLO]” (A3) (*Name and surname* refers to another lecturer whose identity has been preserved).

[17] “[Necesitaría que me enviase su horario de atención para hablar con usted,] porque he perdido el certificado original que acreditaba estas prácticas y lo necesito urgentemente, ya que sólo tengo una fotocopia y me lo tienen que compulsar.” (B3)

[18] “El motivo por el cual me gustaría contactar contigo es que me voy a hacer un lectorado a Inglaterra y por lo tanto, no podría acudir a tus clases, me gustaría hablar contigo para que me explicaras un poco más

⁴ These examples include the whole request sequence. Request strategies are found within square brackets. Messages are transcribed as originally received as regards capital letters, punctuation and accents.

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sobre tu asignatura. [Cuando podría ser posible.] Mañana viernes estaré en Valencia y si no deberíamos dejarlo para la proxima semana, me marchó el jueves.” (C3)

[19] “[Cuando tengas claro la información y la fecha de inscripción me lo mandas por email]” (D3)

Distancing mechanisms such as use of past tense (where present is also possible), conditional and subjunctive forms of verbs, and minimization in the form of hedges addressed to Gricean maxims, weakeners and strengtheners abound in the corpus and can be found in examples 16, 17 and 18. In the same examples, senders convey their desire not to impinge on the receiver through the use of apologetical justifications and the giving of reasons, introduced by “el problema...”(A3) , “el motivo ...”(C3) or “porque ...”(B3). Additional information provided by senders in an effort to make their point clearer attending to receiver’s needs, is found in “pero en cambio en las listas definitivas sale no presentado”(A3) or in “tengo una fotocopia y me lo tienen que compulsar”(B3). In this latter extract, there is also a case of impersonalization through the use of the third person plural verb ending in “tienen”.

Example 19 was extraordinary in the corpus: it is the only message with no request support at all. Notice that the sender also uses the imperative (a strategy used only on six occasions) and that this enhances the feeling of directness. Her request strategy, however, contains internal mitigation like all others. The sender was a former student to whom the lecturer had spoken a couple of days before she sent her the email on the same subject, which may explain the direct means of expression.

Finally, both forms of pronouns were found throughout the corpus. Example 16 and 17 contain deference-oriented *usted* while the pronoun of involvement *tu* occurs in 18 and 19. Another option was impersonalization through avoidance of direct address to the receiver, as can be observed in example 20, where the whole message is skillfully impersonal:

[20] “Hola. He mirado las notas del examen de Ingles y tengo el teórico aprobado y el práctico suspendido (writing), [me gustaría saber si en Septiembre me tengo que presentar a todo o solo a la parte suspendida.] C// Me llamo *Name Surname 1 Surname 2*. Mi email es xxx@xxx. Gracias!” (A2).

In the corpus, the most common form of address was the pronoun of involvement *tu* (15/30), while the pronoun of deference *usted* (8/30) and impersonalization through pronoun avoidance (6/30) were used half as much.

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In one message, the sender used both pronoun types showing, probably, her indecision. Choice of pronoun affects not just the request sequence but the whole message. Choice of pronoun is one of the key interpersonal means of negotiating face and constructing social identities and relations in Spanish (Stewart 2003). The data reveal a preference for the pronoun of solidarity. This agrees with the preferred informal tone of the opening sequences. Deferent and formal openings were scarce and this accords with the less frequent use of *usted*. Impersonalization, like avoidance of receiver's name in openings, gives the sender a way out of opting for form of address. Pronoun avoidance, then, is a skillful social option as regards face threat; it contributes to keep the distance among co-participants in an interaction and therefore it is a strategy of deference.

A look at choice of pronoun in each section only revealed that there were no common patterns among first year students (section A), among students doing their external practice (section B) and among students asking for information about the seminar (section D), although a slight preference for the T-option occurred in sections A and B. Only doctorate students (section C) showed a marked preference for the solidarity pattern: out of the eleven messages, seven contained *tu*, three used *usted* and only one was impersonal. The fact that they already have their degree and are more veteran post-graduate students lessens the distance between co-participants. Furthermore, they have been members of the CofP under study for the longest period of time and therefore the inventory of sociolinguistic resources for communication with lecturers may have already been negotiated over time, and, as a result, this preference for the pronoun of involvement has emerged.

Summing up, the analysis of request sequences shows that students favour the expression of deference both in the formulation of the request proper as well as in the different moves that mitigate, explain and support the request. Only one third of politeness mechanisms expressed solidarity and were skillfully intertwined and scattered throughout the messages. As has been shown, deference and respect do not preclude the deployment of discourse patterns of involvement. While this combination may vary the degree of formality and perhaps deference, it does not curtail the expression of deference and respect.

5.3. Closing sequences

Closing sequences indicate the transition from a state of communication to one of non-communication. Terminating interactions in socially appropriate,

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frictionless ways is usually seen as negotiated accomplishments related to face and interactional organization (Schegloff & Sacks 1973, Albert & Kessler 1978). In asynchronous CMC, however, closing an interaction is not a joint, negotiated achievement. Still, closings cannot be done abruptly and email senders do facework and organizational work to achieve closing successfully, and they also take into account the receiver to achieve this closing smoothly. The interpersonal work in a closing sequence is illustrated in example 21 below, where there is a pre-closing “bueno”, which marks the end of content talk and the beginning of the closing, followed by a quite informal leave-taking routine and thanking. The sender also uses a second leave-taking routine, much more formal this time, and finally signs using only her first name.

[21] “Bueno, hasta pronto y gracias por atenderme,
Un saludo, *Name*.” (A1).

In our data, all 30 messages contained closing sequences. There was great variation of moves within these messages, but most of them contained a thanking (28/30) move and (slightly fewer) a signature (22/30). *Thankings* mostly expressed deference mainly through the use of negative politeness patterns conveying recognition of being indebted to the receiver and through minimization. Expressing gratitude at the end of an encounter was found to have an interaction-closing quality; in fact, there were four messages where thanking moves functioned as the only means of reaching closure, like in example 22.

[22] “[Era para pedirte que me cambies al grupo de 13 a 14 para poder asistir.]
C// Gracias”⁵

Ending with a signature was very common in our data; these were usually informal, expressing positive politeness through the use of proper names, as in examples 23, 24 and 26 (but see 25). A less frequent move was the leave-taking (11/30), which was usually formal and deferent, achieved through use of formulaic language (examples 24 and 25). Apologizing (3/30) moves were rare and always expressed deference, like in example 23, while self-identifications (2/30), well-wishing expressions (1/30) and post scripts (3/30) occurred very little and expressed mainly solidarity.

[23] C// “Mi dirección de correo electrónico es [xxx@xxx](#) y mi teléfono xxx xxx xxx.
Siento mucho este imprevisto. Muchas gracias.

⁵ C// marks the beginning of the closing sequence.

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Name.” (A5)

[24] C// “Espero prontas noticias para ver si podemos hacer algo y te mando por adelantado muchas gracias,

Un saludo,

Name. (C8)

[25] C//”En espera de sus prontas noticias y dándole las gracias de antemano,

atentamente le saluda. *Name Surname.*” (D1)

[26] C// “Gracias,

Name.” (C7)

Summing up, closing sequences expressed deference three times as often as solidarity, although informal expressions of involvement were found here and there. Nevertheless, the closing sequence reflects the status differential and the power imbalance which were the main operating frameworks in the electronic encounter.

6. Summary and conclusions

This paper analysed 30 naturally occurring instances of asynchronous CMC in which university students formulated requests of a lecturer. A linguistic politeness and CofP approach were chosen as theoretical and analytical frameworks for the study. The data were considered in their larger and local social contexts which were described together with their main goal. Despite the transactional nature of the main goal, to make a request, the electronic interactions were seen to constitute a social encounter where interpersonal features abounded. These interactions were also found to constitute self-contained temporarily unilateral electronic encounters in which any response, reaction and negotiation was necessarily absent due to the asynchronous nature of the communicative medium.

The messages in our corpus were found to be internally organized and consisted of opening, requesting and closing sequences. The frame sequences (opening and closing) and the moves contained within all sequences were other-oriented. This means, among other things, that interpersonal judgements are seen as the main reasons for the social framing of the requests in the data.

All three sequences were found to contain discursive politeness patterns functioning as the interpersonal resources available to, and characteristic of, this CofP. The three sequences, having different social functions, were found to contain different types of interpersonal resources. These politeness resources were mainly oriented towards the expression of common ground, involvement and solidarity during the opening sequence, which functions mainly as a social

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pointer or reminder of the type of relationship that holds between co-participants. In the opening moves, senders were shown to seek to establish an informal atmosphere of involvement. In the requesting sequence, however, differential power patterns were more salient in the rapport-sensitive requests, since the data displayed great amounts of politeness patterns oriented towards the expression of deference. Justifying the request, minimizing the imposition and keeping a certain social distance were seen by members of this CofP as essential in making a request of a lecturer. As Coupland et al. (1988) suggest, positive and negative politeness strategies lack functional sameness; while positive politeness and solidarity are used at a more global level to create an informal atmosphere, negative politeness and deference are more specific to the realization of linguistic actions that may be face threatening. The solidarity-oriented openings and the deference-oriented request sequences of our corpus seem to confirm the tendencies noted by the authors above. Finally, closing sequences also revealed three times as many patterns of deference and independence, mainly through the expression of gratitude and deployment of hedging particles. Furthermore, dividing the data into four groups revealed sociological reasons for members' different use of interpersonal resources. For example, veteran, graduate members of the CofP showed a marked tendency for use of pronouns of solidarity.

A point worth highlighting lies in the fact that the expression of solidarity during opening sequences, and the deployment of linguistic strategies of involvement or positive politeness were found not to preclude or diminish the expression of respect. The theoretical framework in this study views familiarity, involvement and solidarity as a means of politeness. Therefore its use does not diminish either the respect conveyed in the messages or their general degree of politeness.

As regards CMC research, our corpus had a transactional purpose that did not lead to the avoidance of interpersonal politeness features; on the contrary, these abounded in all messages. Therefore CMC is decidedly suitable for interpersonal communication. Another point is related to the oral/literate features of the medium. Although this was not the focus of our study, features of conversational language and of written epistolary language were found to coexist in our data. Casual conversational language is typically linked to a solidarity politeness system and institutional written interaction to a deference politeness system (Scollon & Scollon 1995); it is my suggestion that it is the social context of the interaction, and not only the electronic medium, that explains the presence of both types of features, as this study shows. Therefore,

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and with the caveat that more research is needed in this area, I conclude that there is no need to distinguish electronic language from spoken and written languages and single it out as a different category (Collot & Belmore 1996). As many other forms of speaking and writing (speaking to a judge in court or writing a short note to congratulate a close friend, etc), sending emails is a form of writing in which different features and styles may be found, depending on the context within a particular CofP.

Further research, however, is needed in several respects. First, the social reasons for using language typical of casual conversational and formal writing should be explored. The influence that the asynchronous nature of this type of CMC has on the interactional nature of email communication also needs attention. In this sense, it would be interesting to analyse not only initiating interactional emails but also responding interactional emails and observe how social relations, meanings and politeness devices are negotiated over time within a community. A further aspect that needs more research is how the 'real-world' interactions between members of a CofP affect their virtual interactions in cyberspace.

Finally, an important claim is that assessments and conclusions regarding CMC research should be context-related. This discourse, politeness and CofP study constitutes a contribution in this direction.

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