

# The medium is the message: politeness strategies in men's and women's voice mail messages<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Sociolinguistic research suggests that women are more likely than men to use politeness strategies in their speech. Researchers have reported that women pay more compliments than men, that women in talk with same-sex peers use a large number of positive-politeness strategies while men in analogous situations do not, and that women are more likely to apologize, soften criticism or express thanks than men. However, most studies of gender variations in politeness have not examined the relationship between situation and language use. In this data drawn from voice mail messages in a legal setting, male speakers' use of politeness markers was roughly equal to that of women's. Moreover, positive politeness strategies were used almost exclusively by male speakers, and only by attorneys, and the two speakers who used the greatest number of politeness markers in individual messages were both men. Factors which may play a role in explaining these findings include the one-sided nature of voice mail communications and the fact that the data were generated in a legal setting and that seven of the eleven speakers were attorneys.

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## 1. Introduction

During the past 20 years, the explosion in communications technology has revolutionized the American workplace and has radically changed the face of business communications. Where the business letter and the telephone call were once the sole options short of an in-person meeting, today's office provides multiple modalities for

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sending and receiving information virtually instantaneously, via e-mail, voice mail or fax. The growth of the use of these technological innovations has witnessed the development of conventions or practices unique to each, for example the widespread use of ‘smiley face’ and ‘frowny face’ symbols in e-mails, and the increasingly common (and largely undesired) use of fax machines to transmit unsolicited advertisements to unsuspecting recipients.

This paper will examine one of these new modalities, voice mail, from a sociolinguistic perspective. Specifically, on the basis of data collected from male and female speakers in a legal setting, politeness strategies used by both men and women in voice mail messages will be identified and discussed. The resulting findings will then be compared to claims in the literature that women are more attentive to the feelings or ‘face needs’ of their listeners, and thus use speech that is ‘more polite’ than that of men (Brown, 1998; Holmes, 1998; Pilkington, 1998; Tannen, 1994).

## **2. Are women more polite?**

The best known account of politeness in communication is Brown and Levinson’s seminal work (1978; reissued 1987). According to their formulation, polite speech is the use of verbal strategies that take the addressee’s feelings into account by showing respect for his or her ‘face’ (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61; Brown, 1998: 84). The notion of face, adapted from Goffman, involves both the need/desire not to be imposed upon (negative face) and the need/desire to be liked or affirmed (positive face); thus polite speech includes strategies that address both types of face needs (Goffman, 1967: 5–7; Brown and Levinson, 1987: 62).

According to Brown and Levinson, “some acts are intrinsically threatening to face and thus require softening” by use of redressive action in the form of politeness strategies (1987: 24). Positive politeness strategies include compliments, seeking agreement, joking, claiming reflexivity of goals, claiming reciprocity, and expressions of sympathy, understanding and cooperation (Brown 1998: 85). These ‘approach-based’ strategies treat the addressee as someone who is liked or esteemed. Strategies of negative politeness are, conversely, ‘avoidance-based’, and consist of verbal mannerisms which are intended to indicate that the speaker does not wish to be seen as imposing upon the addressee. Negative politeness operates through the use of various ‘softening’ mechanisms, including formality, hedging, questioning rather than asserting, and impersonalizing devices such as passives (*ibid.*).

Sociolinguistic research suggests that women are more likely than men to use politeness strategies in their speech. Researchers have reported, for instance, that women pay more compliments than men (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988, 1998; Johnson and Roen, 1992), that women in talk with same-sex peers use a large number of positive-politeness strategies while men in analogous situations do not (Pilkington, 1998), and that women are more likely to apologize, soften criticism or

express thanks than men (Tannen, 1994: 56–57).<sup>1</sup> However, Ochs notes that while a culture may associate the use of particular linguistic forms with ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ speech, such forms do not typically appear exclusively in the speech of members of that sex alone; instead, such ‘gendered’ forms are also associated with the coding of social information such as activity and stance (1992: 340–341). Thus, Ochs argues that “[k]nowledge of how language relates to gender is not a catalogue of correlations between particular linguistic forms and sets of speakers”, but “entails tacit understanding of (1) how particular linguistic forms can be used to perform particular pragmatic work...and (2) norms, preferences, and expectations regarding the distribution of this work vis-à-vis particular social identities of speakers, referents, and addressees” (ibid: 342). Similarly, Brown notes that any analysis of language use should be situated within the social networks of the individuals involved, since those networks provide the social motivations which trigger linguistic choice (Brown, 1998: 83).

Nevertheless, most studies of gender variations in politeness have not examined the relationship between situation and language use, and have thus failed to consider whether the patterns observed reflect speech styles associated with particular activities, or with differential involvement within those activities, rather than gender differences per se (Johnson and Roen, 1992: 29). This paper will address the relationship between the communicative situation of a caller leaving a voice mail message in a legal setting and the politeness strategies used.

### 3. Lawyers’ informal speech

Although lawyers’ courtroom language has been the subject of sociolinguistic analysis (e.g., Atkinson and Drew, 1979; O’Barr, 1982; Drew, 1992), there have been very few studies of lawyers’ informal professional speech (but see Travers, 1997). The data presented here thus represent a largely unexplored category of institutional interaction: the private communications of attorneys and those who assist them in their handling of litigated cases.

Much of lawyers’ informal professional speech, like much business-related speech in general, involves conversational interactions, both in person and by telephone, related to the work at hand. These interactions take place within the

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<sup>1</sup> Although much of the work on gender and politeness is based on studies of English-speaking subjects (e.g., Herbert, 1989, 1990; Holmes, 1988, 1990; Johnson and Roen, 1992; Pilkington, 1998; Tannen, 1994), some researchers examining gender-related speech patterns in non-European languages have reached similar conclusions. Brown (1998) studied Tzeltal (Mayan) speakers in Chiapas, Mexico, and found a greater use of both positive and negative politeness by women than by men. Similarly, the subordinate position of women in traditional Japanese society is reflected in speech norms that require greater use of politeness by women than by men (Reynolds, 1998). However, Keenan found that women in the Malagasy village that she studied were *less* polite than men, engaging in direct speech and confrontational behavior, while men avoided confrontation by the use of indirect speech styles that emphasized ‘subtlety’ and ‘discretion’ (1974: 139). Interestingly, the members of this speech community valorized male indirectness, asserting that men were more skillful speakers than women (ibid: 140–141).

sociocultural setting of the lawyer's practice area, which varies according to both geography and specialty. The practice of law in the United States is still very local in character, and the community of lawyers practicing in a particular county may observe a markedly different set of interactional conventions than their brother and sister counsel practicing in the neighboring county, or practicing a different specialty in the same county.

The practice setting involved in this study is personal injury litigation in a large urban center. As such venues are the traditional home of the 'runaway' verdict in personal injury cases, a hyper-masculine 'war zone' environment prevails, resulting in a great deal of ritual aggressive display. However, because the present-day reality of American law is that cases are more often resolved through negotiation and settlement than through trial, positive interpersonal relationships are of recognized importance, since opposing attorneys have a shared interest in achieving a settlement that will be acceptable to their respective clients, and this is unlikely to occur in an atmosphere of overt hostility and distrust. Thus, both practical and social considerations favor cordial (and thus 'polite') relationships between opposing counsel.

#### 4. Voice mail as a communicative activity

This study examines a specific subcategory of lawyers' informal professional interactions: the voice mail messages that have become a mainstay of both personal and professional communication in a technologically advanced, and increasingly mobile, society. During the past decade, the proliferation of electronic messaging systems, removing previously existing barriers to communication by creating permanent and potentially intrusive accessibility (Álvarez-Cáccamo and Knoblauch, 1992: 474), has proven to be both a blessing and a curse.

The highly-automated and interactionally sophisticated ("*Press one for...press two for...*") business voice mail systems of today are a relatively recent outgrowth of the more humble telephone answering machine, a phenomenon which has received some attention in the sociolinguistic literature. In an early article, Gold analyzed messages left on her own answering machine and observed that callers employ a variety of 'dialogic devices' such as dialogic couplets and special prosodic marking which, she concluded, function as attempts "to mitigate the central irony of 'conversing' with an absent interlocutor" (1991: 251). This notion of dialogicity is echoed in the later work of Álvarez-Cáccamo and Knoblauch (1992), Dingwall (1992), and Liddicoat (1994).

Álvarez-Cáccamo and Knoblauch note that an answering machine message is a 'one-sided social action' performed for the benefit of an absent recipient; as a result, the caller must compensate for missing communicative channels by producing dialogicity through prosodic variation and non-lexical elements such as 'clicks' or 'smacks' which reproduce communicative engagement and thus enact "a fictive co-presence" (1992: 474–475, 484–487, 498). Similarly, Liddicoat notes that the reduced channels of communication inherent in the activity of leaving a message on a telephone answering machine produce particularized strategies, including

building in potential redundancies, which are designed to overcome potential difficulties resulting from the absence of the recipient (1994: 307).

While none of these authors chose politeness as the focus of their analysis, Dingwall observed that callers who find themselves addressing an answering machine may prefer the formulas of formal politeness, since the monologic nature of the communication does not afford an opportunity to correct misinterpretations that might result from the use of forms perceived to be overly direct (1992: 95), and thus peremptory or rude. Thus, her analysis suggests that callers may use politeness strategies to bridge communicative gaps created by the lack of interactive exchange.

## **5. Data collection**

My investigation focuses on the voice mail messages left for me at my office during the months of October and November, 1998. These messages related to my work as an attorney employed by an automobile and general liability insurance company and involved in a litigation practice, that is, handling cases that eventually proceed to trial if they do not settle. The cases were suits against individuals and companies who had purchased either automobile insurance, homeowner's insurance, or comprehensive general liability insurance (insurance for commercial premises) from the insurer and who were being sued as a result of an automobile accident, a slip and fall, or some other type of personal injury for which the plaintiff hoped to recover damages. Since most of such suits settle, the bulk of my work consisted of investigation and negotiation directed towards achieving the lowest possible monetary settlement, by exposing the weaknesses in the plaintiff's case, in order to minimize the cost to the insurer. My work thus involved a large number of interactions, the majority of which necessarily took place over the telephone, with court personnel, attorneys and their secretaries, claims adjusters, clients, witnesses, and others. Since I was frequently out of the office or away from my desk, I ordinarily received anywhere from five to ten voice mail messages in a given day.

For the purposes of this investigation, which by definition deals with institutional speech, I excluded personal messages from the data collected. I also excluded client communications, which may be subject to the attorney-client privilege. Prior to beginning my data collection, I obtained the informed consent of all persons whose messages were actually collected and transcribed.

The data collected consisted of the messages of 11 speakers, seven of whom were men (AD, AW, BD, DL, CT, DT, RW), and four of whom were women (SA, PJ, KM, JZ).<sup>2</sup> Of the men, six were plaintiff attorneys (that is, my opponents in the respective cases) and one was an 'expert' witness. Of the women, one was an attorney who was my co-counsel in a case (i.e., representing the same client), one was a claims

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<sup>2</sup> An effort was made to include an equal number of men and women in the study. However, as litigation is still a heavily male-dominated specialty area, this was not possible, and in fact only one of the four female callers whose messages were collected was a lawyer. Despite this disparity, however, and totally fortuitously, an equal number of 'informational' messages (see discussion in text) were collected from male and female speakers: eleven from males and eleven from females.

adjuster, and two were secretaries. The attorneys would be considered to be my status equals, as would the expert witness, a highly-paid professional, and the adjuster who, although a mid-level administrative employee, supervised my work on behalf of the insurance company, including granting settlement authority; the secretaries occupied a status that was subordinate to my own. All were in their mid-twenties to late forties.

The data generated fell into two main categories. The first type was a very brief ‘call-me-back’ message, usually including little more than the speaker’s name and telephone number. The second type was an ‘informational’ message which included substantive information which the caller wanted to relay, with an explicit or implicit request for feedback. It is this second type of voice mail which was selected for investigation. Of these informational messages, 22 were collected from 11 speakers, 11 from the males and 11 from the females; messages per caller ranged between one and four. Since all of the messages were directed to me, the messages from men may be categorized as male/female communications, while the messages from women represent same-sex communications between women.

## 6. Analysis

The 22 messages selected were transcribed and then reviewed to identify politeness strategies used. What was immediately apparent is that there were a large number of politeness markers used overall. Moreover, most of the speakers (seven out of eleven) were men, and their speech was at least as polite as the women’s, perhaps more so. I chose the following politeness markers for detailed examination: compliments, joking and claiming reciprocity, thanking, taking blame and apologizing, softening the force of requests, and formality. I found that the positive politeness strategies (compliments, joking and claiming reciprocity) were used almost exclusively by male speakers, and *only* by attorneys, while both male and female speakers regularly used negative politeness strategies.

### 6.1. Positive politeness

According to Brown and Levinson, positive face reflects the desire to have one’s possessions, goals, and achievements desired by a socially or situationally relevant class of others; thus, positive politeness expresses either a general appreciation of the addressee’s wants, or similarity between the wants of the speaker and addressee (1987: 63, 101). It thus reproduces the characteristics of conversational interaction among intimates, where expressions of interest and approval, shared knowledge and desires, and reciprocity of obligations are routinely exchanged (*ibid*: 101). Brown and Levinson note that it is this identification with intimate language that gives positive politeness its redressive force, since such strategies are used “as a kind of metaphorical extension of intimacy” which functions as “a kind of social accelerator” by means of which the speaker signals his or her desire to “come closer” to the hearer (*ibid*: 103).

Both the well-described folk model of ‘male inexpressiveness’ and the literature of language and gender noting that, in many contexts, women’s speech displays a more personal focus than men’s (Sattel, 1983: 118; Herbert, 1990: 204), suggest that women will tend to use the routines of positive politeness more often than men do. However, in these data, positive politeness strategies, such as compliments, joking, claiming reciprocity, etc., were used almost exclusively by male speakers; only one female speaker used any of these strategies. Moreover, positive politeness was used *only* by attorneys; five of the six male attorneys, as well as the sole female attorney, used positive politeness in their voice mail messages to me.

### 6.1.1. Compliments

A compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly bestows credit upon the addressee for some possession, skill, characteristic, or the like, that is positively evaluated by the speaker and the addressee (Holmes, 1988: 446). As expressions of solidarity, compliments occur most often between status equals (Herbert, 1990: 220; Holmes, 1998: 114), and may function as a negotiating strategy (Herbert, 1989: 25).

A number of studies have identified differences in male and female compliment strategies. Holmes found that women give and receive significantly more compliments than men do, and that men compliment women more often than they do other men (Holmes, 1988: 449–451). Holmes also noted that women employ syntactic forms that strengthen the force of their compliments, while men’s compliments are often attenuated or hedged (cited in Herbert, 1990: 205). Similarly, Herbert found that impersonal third-person compliment forms occurred in 60% of male-offered compliments versus 20% of female-offered compliments (*ibid*; see also Johnson and Roen, 1992: 28). However, a key weakness of these studies is that they fail to examine the relationship between language use and situation (Johnson and Roen, 1992: 29).

In my data, two of the male speakers, and one female speaker, included compliments in their messages. All of these speakers were attorneys and, as such, would be considered to be my status equals.

- (1) *This is Mr. D\_\_\_\_\_ calling. I just received this motion for summary disposition . . . and I just wondering—uh, please tell me that this wasn’t your idea . . . I mean, please tell me that this was your co-counsel’s idea because . . . I’m sure that a woman of your intelligence . . . and of your pedigree, educational pedigree . . . would have, uh . . . known better than to file something as frivolous as this. . . .* (AD)

In example 1, the speaker—my opponent in the case in question—in the midst of criticizing a motion that I had filed, acknowledges my ‘intelligence’ and ‘educational pedigree’, thus disarming the otherwise face-threatening nature of his remarks. The compliment is an oblique reference to the fact that I attended a prestigious law school, and also, by implicature, to the fact that he did not—evidence that he is actually placing himself in a one-down position by offering this flattering aside. This type of compliment corresponds to the model of male-male compliments which are referentially orientated, ‘genuine expressions of admiration’ (Holmes, 1998: 106). In

the highly competitive and status-conscious atmosphere of the legal profession, where ‘achievements’ such as living in an affluent community, driving a luxury car, and even writing with an expensive pen are apt to excite the admiration and envy of one’s peers, overt references to these and other indexes of status (such as having attended the ‘right’ schools) are a common form of flattery. Nevertheless, the characterization of such remarks as ‘compliments’ may seem unconvincing where, as here, they are embedded in seemingly sarcastic criticism.

However, as Brown and Levinson note, a given comment may implicate various locations along what might be described as the compliment–criticism continuum; thus background knowledge may be needed to interpret such utterances (1987: 218). In this case, it becomes important to know that my opponent and I were well known to each other through a lengthy history of professional contacts, and enjoyed the kind of friendly, joking relationship that is common among lawyers, who often seek to modulate their interactions through word play, banter, and teasing (compare Norrick, 1994: 410), in order to dissipate the always latent aggression and antagonism which might otherwise reduce the possibility of engaging in productive interchange (compare Maltz andorker, 1998: 429; Ceely, 1989: 252; Lyman, 1989: 167), including the mutually desirable goal of resolving cases.

Brown and Levinson note that, in contexts of friendship and intimacy, conventionalized insults may serve as a mechanism for stressing solidarity (1987: 229; see also Tannen, 1998: 182–187). This analysis is particularly applicable to what they refer to as ‘jousting arenas,’ that is, situations or subjects involving competitive verbal displays (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 247). The legal profession is a prototypical example of such a ‘jousting arena.’ Thus, between lawyers who enjoy positive professional relationships, acting *disrespectful* can signal solidarity, according to the principles of Tannen’s ‘paradox of power and solidarity,’ since the enactment of disrespect implies a relationship where distance, respect and power count for little, and thus conveys the metamessage ‘this is play’ (cited in Norrick, 1994: 421). Viewed in this context, it is clear that AD’s comments were not intended to be taken literally.

Moreover, as a lawyer, one does not telephone one’s opponent to convey one’s opinion that he or she has filed a frivolous motion, and to beg for an explanation of its filing. Rather, one peruses such a motion with a deep feeling of satisfaction, and addresses one’s criticisms to the attention of the court, accompanied, of course, by a request for appropriate sanctions. Thus, an opponent’s indignant suggestion that one’s motion lacks merit is quite likely to be reinterpreted as a betrayal of concern that it will be granted—hence, a compliment.

- (2) *Hi, Pam, this is B\_\_\_\_\_ D\_\_\_\_\_. It’s 11:22 and I’m calling you back on \_\_\_\_\_.* Uh, can you give me a call . . . . 999-000-0000. And I still don’t believe you’re. . . as old as you say you are. Bye. (BD)

In example 2, the speaker was following up on a previous conversation in which we discussed the possibility of settling a case (which would result in money being paid to both his client and himself). He used a compliment to disarm the threat to positive face that is implicit in settlement negotiations, where the defense attorney

must concede that the plaintiff's case has value (and thus has merit) in order to make a settlement offer. Unlike the speaker in example 1, who knew me relatively well and thus treated me like a 'buddy', the speaker in example 2, with whom I was less well acquainted, chose a more gendered approach, thus following the well-documented tendency for women to be complimented on their appearance (Holmes, 1998: 111).

- (3) *Hi, Pamela, it's S\_\_\_\_\_ A\_\_\_\_\_ about the case, you know, as you call, our favorite case. . . Um, the motion that you wrote was very good, I-I read and reviewed it all and ... thanks so much for sending me a copy of that.... (SA)*

In example 3, the speaker, who is the only female attorney in this group, compliments me on a motion that I had written. This speaker was my co-counsel in the case under discussion in her message; from a practical standpoint, this means that we represented the same client but that I, as lead counsel, performed all of the 'work' of the representation, while she served only a monitoring function. Her compliment on my motion, like her expression of thanks, was a part of her ritualized way of acknowledging my efforts on behalf of our mutual client, and illustrates the tendency of women to use compliments as positively-affective speech acts that function as expressions of solidarity (Holmes, 1988: 449).

#### 6.1.2. Joking and claiming reciprocity

Two other positive politeness strategies—joking and claiming reciprocity—appeared in the messages of male speakers. Although only one occurrence of each was noted, they are included for their significance to the discussion of positive politeness as a whole.

- (4) *Hi, Pamela, it's A\_\_\_\_\_ W\_\_\_\_\_ calling on the \_\_\_\_\_ case. Uh, remember the case where I did you the huge favor by setting aside the default. Uh... you filed a motion for change of venue. Call me so we can discuss it so we don't have to go out there; I believe it can be worked out. . . . (AW)*

Claiming reciprocity is a particular manifestation of what Brown and Levinson categorize as a class of positive politeness strategies that seek to convey that the speaker and addressee are cooperatively involved in the relevant activity (1987: 125). In assuming or asserting reciprocity, the speaker claims or urges the existence of cooperation by referring to the existence of reciprocal rights or obligations, thus saying, in effect, 'I did X for you last week, now you do Y for me this week,' or vice versa (ibid: 129). In example 4, the speaker claimed reciprocity by reminding me that he had previously agreed to my request to enter into a stipulated order rather than forcing me to prepare a motion and appear in court, and then requested a return of the favor, that is, that I would dismiss my motion in return for a stipulated order, which would save him from having to prepare a response to my motion and appear in court.

- (5) *Hi. . . Pam. . . this is your. . . ex-friend C\_\_\_\_\_ T\_\_\_\_\_. No, I'm kiddin'; give me a ring. 999-000-0000. Bye. (CT)*

Joking is a basic positive politeness strategy for putting the hearer ‘at ease’ by asserting intimacy (ibid: 124, 229). Conversational joking is associated with both aggression and rapport (Norrick, 1994: 409), and is a prominent feature of many varieties of male peer-group speech (Maltz and Borker, 1998: 429; Lyman, 1989: 167). In the male-dominated world of personal injury litigation, joking is a basic strategy of personal interaction which serves to reduce feelings of aggression and hostility. In example 5, the speaker’s joking labeling of himself as ‘your ex-friend’ was an oblique reference to a strategy that he had used which could be considered to be underhanded, and which had gained him an advantage, thus placing me at a disadvantage. Although we had discussed this previously, his joking reference was an acknowledgment that the situation was face threatening to me.

## 6.2. *Negative politeness*

Negative politeness is redressive action that addresses the hearer’s desire that her actions and her attention be unimpeded (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 129). While positive politeness functions as a generalized interaction enhancer, negative politeness is specifically focused and serves to minimize a particular imposition (ibid). It is most succinctly encapsulated in the formulaic, virtually automatic utterances that spring to the lips of social interactants hundreds of times a day, including ‘please,’ ‘thank you,’ ‘sorry,’ ‘excuse me,’ and the like. In my data, in contrast with positive politeness strategies, which were used almost exclusively by male speakers, both male and female speakers used a number of negative politeness strategies in their voice mail messages. Such strategies as thanking, taking blame and apologizing, softening the force of requests, and formality were frequently used by both male and female speakers, suggesting that negative politeness is the common currency of voice mail messages, at least in the business setting, where the overt purpose of most voice mail messages is to induce the recipient to do work.

### 6.2.1. *The ‘thank you close’*

The most common negative politeness strategy used was the ‘thank you close’; 15 out of 22 voice mails, or 68%, closed with the words ‘thanks,’ ‘thank you,’ or some variation:

- (6) *My number is 999-000-000. Thank you.* (DT)
- (7) *Thanks. Good-bye.* (RW)
- (8) *Thank you very much. It’s A\_\_\_\_\_ D\_\_\_\_\_.* *So long now.* (AD)
- (9) *Give me a call back at 888-000-0000. Thank you.* (DL)
- (10) *Thanks. Bye.* (PJ)
- (11) *Thanks, Pamela. Bye-bye.* (SA)

Men were somewhat less likely than women to include the ‘thank you close’; seven of the 11 messages left by male speakers included this formula, as compared to nine of the eleven messages left by women.

As Tannen points out, conversation is ritual, and we expect ritual expressions at points of transition (1994: 43). In fact, Tannen’s subjects in *Talking from 9 to 5*

include speakers who appeared to use the word ‘thanks’ as a ritual conversational closer (ibid: 54–55). Tannen’s speakers were situated in institutional settings, and were involved in making requests or giving directives to coworkers and subordinates, acts that are inherently threatening to the hearer’s negative face (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 65–66). Thus, their use of the word ‘thanks’ could be seen as multifunctional, signaling both the end of the conversation and the desire to counteract any face damage inflicted by the directive or request. Similarly, in her study of telephone answering machine messages, Dingwall notes that while the use of such termination particles could be attributed to the absence of an opportunity for exchanging ritual good-byes, it appears instead that the choice of particles is closely related to the activity performed in the message which, in the case of the example given, was a request for a favor (1992: 491). Applying Tannen’s and Dingwall’s analyses to the data presented here, one can see that the speakers’ use of the ‘thank you close’ reflects their awareness of the imposition inherent in institutional calls, and the consequent desire to diminish that imposition through the use of negative politeness strategies.

### 6.2.2. Taking blame and apologizing

The negative politeness strategy of ‘ritual self-deprecation’ (Tannen, 1994: 51) involves taking blame in order to avoid implying that the addressee is at fault. This strategy was used by two speakers, one male and one female:

- (12) *I guess I’m not sure exactly what they want.... (DT)*  
 (13) *I don’t recall, I-I don’t recall seeing it at all and.. I was just wondering, do you recall, do you have it in your office anywhere. Um.. maybe perhaps it went to J\_\_\_ and them.... (KM)*

In example 12, the speaker, an expert witness I had retained, was responding to my letter asking him to provide me with copies of material which had been requested by the plaintiff’s attorney. Rather than stating that my request was unclear, he took the blame upon himself by indicating that he was confused, and thus avoided placing me in a one-down position (as someone who had not provided adequate instructions). Similarly, in example 13, the speaker, a secretary, takes the blame for not having seen the missing document, ‘wonders’ whether I might have it, and then immediately follows this very mitigated suggestion (which potentially places me in the one-down position of the person who misplaced it) by suggesting that it may have been mistakenly placed on someone else’s desk.

Both of these speakers displayed reluctance to impose upon me and did this through what Brown and Levinson refer to as the ‘deferential use of hesitation and bumbliness’ (1987: 186–187) which, in these examples, is realized through the concatenation of hedging phrases, words, and particles which signal the speaker’s attention to my face needs (ibid: 93). Thus, DT avoids the bald statement ‘I can’t ascertain what was requested from your letter’ by use of the hedges

I GUESS+I'M NOT SURE+EXACTLY. Similarly, KM, who wishes to know whether the misplaced document is in my office, surrounds her question with the hedges I DON'T RECALL+I DON'T RECALL SEEING IT AT ALL+I WAS JUST WONDERING+MAYBE+PERHAPS+IT WENT TO J. AND THEM.

Two other speakers, one male and one female, included covert apologies in their messages:

- (14) *Hi, Pam, it's R\_\_\_\_\_ W\_\_\_\_\_. I'm callin' on \_\_\_\_\_.* I guess you thought you got rid of it but I understand it's your U-M [Uninsured Motorist; Editor's Note] case as well.... (RW)
- (15) *Hi, Pamela, this is J\_\_\_\_\_ with MES [name of witness service] one last time....* (JZ)

An apology is a social act that is aimed at maintaining good relations between the speaker and the addressee. To apologize is to act politely, both in the vernacular sense and in the more technical sense of attending to the addressee's face needs (Holmes, 1990: 156–157). One way of attending to the addressee's face needs is for the speaker to indicate that s/he is aware of them and is taking them into account in communicating the potentially face-threatening act by apologizing for the impingement (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 187).

In example 14, the male speaker, a plaintiff attorney, had called to advise me of a new claim arising out of a case that we had previously concluded. His apologetic aside, 'I guess you thought you got rid of it but I understand it's your U-M case as well', conveys his reluctance to impose upon me by use of the hedges 'I guess' and 'I understand', which soften the force of his presumed contradiction of my existing beliefs by introducing a vagueness that disclaims any intent to attribute to me either ignorance of the remaining claim or responsibility for its handling (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 114, 117). He thus both acknowledges the unwelcome nature of the news that he is delivering and signals his desire to avoid imposing upon me by making me do more work than I had expected to do.

In example 15, the female speaker, a secretary, has initiated the last of a series of telephone calls between the two of us, between her and my expert witness, and between the expert witness and me, in order to clarify a point in the expert's opinion. Her apologetic opening, 'This is J\_\_\_ with MES *one last time*' (emphasis added), indicates that this follow-up telephone call is not intended to impose upon me, and that I will be able to conclude this series of transactions by making a single final call to her.

### 6.2.3. Softening the force of requests

Conventional indirectness resolves the dilemma created by the speaker's desire to go on record and yet to give the hearer an 'out' by being indirect (Brown and Levinson, 1987:132). Indirect speech acts are the most significant form of conventional indirectness and often consist of rhetorical questions (ibid). In English, the most commonly-used form of conventional indirectness involves the statement of a 'felicity condition', that is, a condition that must exist/be performed for the pro-

jected result of the speech act to occur: For example, for a request to be felicitous, it is a necessary condition that the addressee have the potential ability to grant the request, hence the use of such common formulations as ‘Can you please pass the salt?’ (ibid: 132–133). The degree of politeness expressed by indirect speech can be calibrated by the compounding of hedges, indirectness and particles such as ‘please’, which increase the negative politeness of expressions (ibid: 143). Thus, forms such as ‘could you pass the salt?’, ‘would you pass the salt?’, and ‘may I please have the salt?’ mark descending degrees of politeness, culminating with the bald imperative ‘pass the salt’, which is the least polite of all (ibid: 142–143).

In my data, strategies used to soften the force of requests (which are usually for immediate action) included hedges and indirectness, used by both male and female speakers:

- (16) *If you could give me a call when you get a chance....* (DT)
- (17) *I will issue the draft and if you can send the release to Mr. T\_\_\_\_\_.* (PJ)
- (18) *So if you can put that in.. your schedule, some time... Okay?* (KM)
- (19) *[B]ut again, if you could call me with—about all these issues, that would be great.* (SA)
- (20) *Uh, if you can give me a call, I’d appreciate it; I-I can explain better.* (RW)

In these examples, the two male and three female speakers all use the almost identical formulation ‘if you could/can’ to phrase their request. Two of the speakers, SA (female) and RW (male) further mitigate their requests by adding expressions of gratitude (‘It would be great’ and ‘I would appreciate it’). These strategies may be contrasted with the bald imperatives used by the one female (JZ) and two male (DL and AW) speakers in the examples below:

- (21) *Give me a call back at 999-555-5555.* (DL)
- (22) *Call me so we can discuss it so we don’t have to go out there.* (AW)
- (23) *Um, so give me a call back and let me know.* (JZ)

As can be seen, both male and female speakers used both mitigated and unmitigated forms of requests.

#### 6.2.4. Formality

Formality is a negative politeness strategy that uses conventionalized indirectness to display deference to the addressee and thus minimize the effect of the speaker’s imposition (Brown & Levinson 1987: 70). Lexical and grammatical realizations of formality include hedges, impersonalization, nominalization, and other distancing mechanisms that redress face-threatening acts with linguistic deference (ibid).

Formality was used by two speakers, but with much different intent.

- (24) *Pamela, hi, this is S\_\_\_\_\_ A\_\_\_\_\_ calling regarding the \_\_\_\_\_ case. I hope all is well with you. Um, I was just calling about the depositions tomorrow. I'm assuming they're not going, um, but th— if that's not the case, can you please call me. Also, I just wanted to, um, confirm that your motion for summary disposition is still going on.. uh, this Friday, the twentieth, um, and, uh, there's also a lot of other depositions scheduled; I don't know if they're going or not. I'd like to confirm that with you. And, uh, the answers to interrogatories regarding lay witnesses.. I'm assuming you're gonna be drafting those but again, if you could just call me with all—about all these issues, that would be great. 999-000-0000. Thanks, Pamela. Bye-bye. (SA)*

In example 24, the female speaker SA, as noted above, was my co-counsel in the case under discussion. This required her to continually ascertain whether the appropriate work on the case was being done by me—a position in which it would be easy for her inquiries to take the tone of 'supervision of' my work. In order to avoid this, her messages were extremely cordial, formal, and polite, thus emphasizing our coequal status and dispelling any suggestion that she was 'checking up on' me and thus claiming a status superior to my own. In this example, after identifying herself, she begins her message with an almost ceremonial formal greeting, 'I hope all is well with you.' She then switches to the past tense ('I was just calling...') to broach the subject of her call, using what Brown and Levinson refer to as 'point-of-view distancing' (ibid: 204–205) to dissipate the imposition of her requests, which are presented in highly mitigated hedged forms: 'I'm assuming...', 'I just wanted...', 'I'd like to...', 'I'm assuming...', 'if you could just call...'.

Brown and Levinson note that the greater a speaker's use of negative politeness strategies, the more effectively s/he communicates a desire to impose minimally on the addressee (ibid: 93). This speaker used formality to go on record with negative politeness, paying respect and deference to my position vis-à-vis our mutual client by maintaining social distance, thereby making it clear that she did not intend to interfere with my freedom of action by attempting to direct my handling of the case (ibid: 70–72).

- (25) *This is Mr. D\_\_\_\_\_ calling, I just received this motion for summary disposition... and I was just wondering—uh, uh, please tell me that this was your co-counsel's idea... I mean, please tell me that this was your co-counsel's idea because... I'm sure that a woman of your intelligence... and of your pedigree, educational pedigree... would have, uh, known better than to file something as frivolous as this. ((Breath)) This is a frivolous pleading, subject to the, uh, tch, rule providing for sanctions and, uh, I formally request that you withdraw this pleading, otherwise I will be seeking, uh, those sanctions and other appropriately provided, uh, under the Michigan, uh, tch, Court Rules, so thank you very much. Bye. (AD)*

In example 25, the male speaker uses the formulas of negative politeness, including formality, to display antagonism through the use of sarcasm, in a manner reminiscent of Brown's Tenejapan subjects (1993: 155–156). Like the female speaker SA, he uses hedges and point-of-view distancing—'I just received...', 'I was just wondering...'. 'Please tell me...', 'I mean, please...'—to produce a message that is painstakingly polite in form. However, in a classic example of the iron fist in the velvet glove, this speaker uses formal politeness to deliver acerbic criticisms of my professional conduct, following by a thinly disguised threat—a request for the withdrawal of my pleading in order to avoid retaliation—couched in highly formal, ceremonial terms ('I formally request...').

This particular plaintiff attorney has a very abrasive style which represents an extreme even in the setting of personal injury litigation, where verbal aggression is the rule rather than the exception. Because we were well acquainted, he knew that I viewed his verbal attacks as a form of rhetorical overkill which was therefore humorous, and thus did not take his ostensibly insulting remarks seriously. He was thus able to give free rein to his proclivities when speaking to me, as the long-winded nature of his messages bears witness.

Viewed in this context, his formality, including referring to himself as 'Mr.' (although I addressed him by his first name) is actually a *positive* politeness strategy signaling a 'play' frame (Norrick, 1994: 421) since, by exaggerating his own verbal mannerisms for my benefit, he treated me as a friend or 'insider', someone who was aware that he was engaging in word play and did not intend the literal meaning of the phrases he was uttering. The play frame is explicitly keyed in the 'threat' portion of the message by the recurrent presence of non-lexical clicks ('tch'), which, as part of playful or unmonitored talk, can be produced without losing face only in intimate interactions (Álvarez-Cáccamo and Knoblauch, 1992: 484). This speaker's mock formality may be compared and contrasted with the marked informality of KM, a secretary:

- (26) *Hey, Pam, it's \_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_. Could you give... \_\_\_ a call. His number is area code 888-555-5555. That's on \_\_\_\_\_... um, give 'im a call an' talk about this case, okay? Thanks!... Bye... I told him you'll pro'ly call tomorrow... in the morning, okay? So if you can put that in... your schedule, some time... okay? Thank you. (KM)*

This female speaker, like the male plaintiff attorney in example 25, also knew me well, and also treated me as a friend; however, she did so through the use of informality, including use of the informal vernacular greeting 'hey' and relaxed pronunciation ('give 'im a call an' talk...', 'I told him you'll pro'ly call...') characteristic of casual unmonitored speech (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1998: 214–215).

## 7. Discussion

Brown and Levinson note that "gender is just one of the relevant parameters in any situation, and is indeed potentially irrelevant in a particular situation" (1987:

30). Thus, researchers in language and gender have pointed out that activity can be more important than gender in shaping language use: Linguistic strategies may reflect the nature of the activity, as well as the genres and registers associated with that activity, rather than gender-specific speech styles (Johnson and Roen, 1992, 29; Ochs, 1992: 340–342). However, although sociolinguists and ethnographers of communication have demonstrated that genre and discourse type exert decisive constraints on linguistic behavior, the impact of discourse type on politeness investment is only beginning to be systematically investigated (Kasper, 1990: 205). Thus, few studies of politeness have examined the relationship between activity and language use (but see, e.g., Johnson and Roen, 1992).

In this study of voice mail messages in a legal setting, the joint activity of the interactants is the conduct of disputed cases. Voice mail messages are an integral part of this process, since it is primarily through telephonic communications that the administrative tasks involved in case handling are performed. Thus, speakers are involved in a routine but important activity, because the ability to bring a case to conclusion is dependent upon the timely and efficient performance of these mundane tasks. Moreover, a central motivation of the speakers in this study was to obtain the recipient's (my) cooperation; thus the pervasive deployment of politeness strategies in their voice mail messages should come as no surprise. However, this does not explain the roughly equal use of negative politeness by male and female speakers to this female recipient, or the use of positive politeness by attorneys (a group not known for their politeness) in light of its non-use by non-attorneys in the same setting.

Brown and Levinson posit three 'social dimensions' or 'sociological variables' that determine how speakers shape their utterances to attend to a hearer's face (1987: 74, 78).<sup>3</sup> These are: the social distance between the speaker and hearer, the relative power of the speaker and hearer, and the ranking of the speaker's imposition in the particular culture (*ibid*: 74). Thus, where there is a disparity of power between the interactants, one might expect the subordinate to be more polite to his or her superior than vice versa (*ibid*: 80). By the same token, the widespread perception that gender is a factor in the construction of social asymmetry and power (*ibid*: 30) may lead one to expect that women will be more polite than men. However, as Brown and Levinson also point out, the operation of these factors is context dependent; thus situational sources of power may defeat expectations based on stable social roles (*ibid*: 79).

In my data, nine of the speakers would be considered to be my status equals within the relevant setting (the attorneys, the expert witness, and the adjuster), while two were employed in subordinate positions (as secretaries). Therefore, based on social role alone, one might expect those two speakers whose roles were subordinate to my own to display greater politeness in their voice mail messages than did my status equals. However, in the context of the specific situation in which they were acting—leaving me a message to which they wished me to respond—each of the

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<sup>3</sup> Brown and Levinson note that these factors operate only to the extent that they 'count' for the interactants themselves (1987: 74). Thus, they are not the analyst's measures of actual or perceived ranking, power and distance, but those which the actors mutually entertain (*ibid*: 74–75).

eleven speakers stood in the same relationship to me, that is, as one requesting me to take some action. Moreover, the degree of imposition was roughly equal across requests, as the requested actions ranged from returning the call to discuss some matter to performing some other relatively uncomplicated task. In this context, the use of negative politeness by male and female speakers, and the frequency of negative politeness strategies in the messages of all speakers, appears to be a function of the activity being performed.

Positive politeness strategies, however, were used almost exclusively by male speakers and, perhaps more significantly, were used *only* by speakers who were lawyers. The sole female attorney in this study used compliments coupled with formality to show solidarity and deference, while the male lawyers used a number of different positive politeness strategies, including compliments, mock criticism, joking, and claiming reciprocity. These men's speech styles were more informal and colloquial than that of their female colleague, and thus (although they were my opponents) also more intimate, displaying a propensity to press the 'social accelerator' (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 103) that typifies lawyers' courtroom speech. Thus, the differential usage of positive politeness strategies by female and male attorneys in this small sample may be attributable to the more extensive courtroom experience of the males, which triggers an awareness of the effectiveness of emotional forms of persuasion. In addition, consideration should be given to the social networks in which these communications are situated. Entry into the male-dominated peer culture of personal injury litigation is more difficult for female attorneys than it is for their male colleagues. Thus, female attorneys may operate in a more loosely knit social network than do their male counterparts, causing them to maintain greater social distance by displaying greater degrees of formality (*ibid*: 31).

What motivates positive politeness in lawyer-to-lawyer communications, a situation in which 'approach-based' strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 85) may appear out of place, particularly in interactions between opponents? One explanation is suggested by Kasper's 'politeness continuum', in which transactional and interactional forms of discourse are the opposing poles (1990: 205). Because transactional discourse focuses on the optimally efficient transmission of information, the need for truthfulness, clarity, and brevity overrides the face concerns that motivate politeness; in interactional discourse, however, the Cooperative Principle is regularly overridden by the Politeness Principle, in order to ensure that participants' face needs are addressed (*ibid*). According to this analysis, surgeons' operating room speech and air traffic controllers' speech would be examples of transactional discourse types, while ordinary social conversation would be an example of interactional speech.

At first blush, lawyers' informal speech might appear to be task oriented, and thus transactional in nature. However, in the American legal system today, where most cases are resolved by settlement, the bulk of the work conducted in law offices consists of some form of negotiation; thus, in lawyers' informal speech, as in ordinary social conversation, securing absence of confrontation and relational management are primary goals, making politeness maximally important (*ibid*: 206). In Brown and Levinson's words, lawyers use politeness because "politeness... presupposes [the]

potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it, and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties” (1987: 11). Moreover, lawyers negotiating settlements with opposing counsel must arrive at a settlement figure to which both sides can agree. In order to ‘meet in the middle’, they often use the techniques of classical persuasion, such as invoking common ground by suggesting the existence of shared values, interests, and goals (Larson, 1983: 6), which is also one of the positive politeness strategies described by Brown and Levinson (1987: 103). Thus, positive politeness is part of an attorney’s stock in trade.

## 8. Conclusions

During the past several decades, sociolinguistic research on language and gender has variously attributed differences in speech patterns of men and women to men’s ‘dominance’ over women or to the theory that men and women inhabit separate sociolinguistic subcultures (see discussion in Maltz and Borker, 1998). Proponents of both views have argued that women in general are more attentive to others’ feelings and thus more ‘polite’ than men (Brown, 1998; Holmes, 1998; Pilkington, 1998; Tannen, 1994). In addition, Fishman’s observations that women are ‘more actively engaged in insuring [conversational] interaction than [are] men’ have been widely endorsed (Fishman, 1978: 404; DeFrancisco, 1998: 176; Maltz and Borker, 1998: 418). However, to date few studies of gender and politeness have examined the relationship between the communicative situation of the speakers and the politeness strategies used.

This study has examined business-related voice mail messages left for a single recipient (myself), an attorney employed by an automobile and general liability insurer; thus the communicative situation of each speaker was identical, including the intention to prompt some action that would further the conduct of a specific legal case. The professional roles of the speakers varied; six were attorneys, one was an expert witness, one was a claims adjuster, and two were secretaries. All but the secretaries would be considered to be my status equals in the situation and setting. Accordingly, the activity, situation, and recipient being invariant, one might expect that any variations in politeness would correspond to categories of status or gender. However, this did not occur. Instead, the use of negative politeness by male and female speakers was roughly equal, while use of positive politeness did not appear to be related to status or gender, but rather to role, since positive politeness was used only by attorneys.

Negative politeness lies at the heart of respect behavior, and acts to minimize a specific imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 129). In Western cultures, negative politeness strategies, including conventional indirectness and hedges on illocutionary force, are the most conventional means of redressing face-threatening acts (ibid: 130). Viewed in its situational context, the use of negative politeness in business-related voice mail messages may be seen as an acknowledgment that, simply by being required to play back and listen to a message, the recipient is *doing work*. Thus, the negative politeness strategies used in these messages serve to minimize the

imposition that is inherent in the communication itself. In addition, the negative politeness strategies in these voice mail messages may be a function of their status as one-sided social actions (Álvarez-Cáccamo and Knoblauch, 1992: 474): When there is no face-to-face interaction, there is no possibility of negotiating the success or failure of the communication (Liddicoat, 1994: 307); thus callers may use negative politeness to compensate for missing communication channels (Álvarez-Cáccamo and Knoblauch, 1992: 475).

Conversely, positive politeness, which functions to express interest in, and approval of, the hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 101), may appear to have no place in these one-sided communications. However, although not used by any of the non-attorney speakers, positive politeness strategies were used by six of the seven attorneys whose messages were recorded in this study. It thus appears that lawyers, who seek not only to redress any impositions created by their speech, but to gain a positive advantage, use positive politeness in their voice mail messages, as they do in co-present interactions, in order to increase the persuasive force of their speech.

Although this corpus of data is too small to allow the formation of any definite conclusions, it does raise questions which could be tested in further research. For example, although this study includes data recorded by six attorneys who were actually my opponents in litigation, all six were men speaking to a woman (that is, to me). Thus, one set of questions which arises is: What type of data would be generated where the speaker was a female and the addressee was a male opponent? where the opponents were both females? where they were both males? Would the types or numbers of politeness strategies used change, or remain the same? Although this study has raised more questions than it has answered, it has served to illustrate that, even in the relatively impolite world of a personal injury litigation practice, both male and female speakers make frequent use of politeness strategies, at least in their voice mail messages, thus softening the edges of the perennial ‘war of words’ in which lawyers are mutually engaged.

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