

## **Power and Politeness: Social Interaction in Philippine Higher Education Classrooms**

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Drawing upon naturalistic data from Philippine higher education classrooms, this article examines how talk is used by three Filipino professors to negotiate unequal power relationships and minimize status distinctions between themselves and the students. It uses Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to unpack how they deploy linguistic resources to soften the exercise of power, create solidarity and mitigate potentially face-threatening acts such as correcting students' errors and giving orders. Data suggest that the professors do not use their institutionally vested power with a blunt force. They employ a mixture of linguistic strategies to subvert the distancing effects of the teacher-student power differential. They emphasise asymmetry to ensure that the objectives of the lesson are met; at the same time they show consideration for the protection and preservation of their students' public self image. This article discusses the complex interface between power and politeness within the context of higher education discourse.

**Key words:** power, politeness, higher education discourse

### **1. Introduction**

This study examines naturally occurring classroom discourse as it shapes and is shaped by the power and social relations between professors and students. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1994, p.19) argue, the school is a "universe of language" where professors are expected to enforce classroom rules. Their words, it has been argued, are "not made to be believed but to be obeyed and to compel obedience" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 76). By virtue of their status, age, skill and authority to assign grades (Rees-Miller, 2000, 1995, p.1095), they are sanctioned by the institution to present and insist on a particular way of thinking and acting in the world and then demand a display of this particular way of thinking and acting. They determine the topics for discussion, distribute speaking rights, and regulate the amount of speaking time (Swann 2009, p. 205). Indeed, Bourdieu and Passeron (1994) add, "of all the professorial duties,

transmission by speech is the only one which is felt to be an unconditional imperative" (p. 21).

In the Philippine context, it is claimed that classroom culture tends to be highly teacher-centred and authoritarian (Licuanan, 2009). Teachers are viewed as the "supreme authority" whose words are accepted by the students as the "gospel truth" Tiongson (2009). However, as data excerpts will illustrate, this 'supreme authority' is often mitigated and exercised with a great deal of concern placed on the protection and preservation of the students' face.

#### **1.1 Theoretical framework**

This paper draws on insights from pragmatically informed discourse analysis and interactional sociolinguistics. It uses Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving model of politeness as a preliminary descriptive framework against which empirical evidence has been contrasted.

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory revolves around the notion of face, a concept borrowed from Goffman (1967), which refers to the public self-image of all rational adults in social interaction. It is claimed that everybody has face and face needs, which can be *positive* or *negative*. A *positive* face need is the desire to be well thought of, liked and admired by others; a *negative* face need is the desire to act freely, unimpeded and not to be imposed upon by others.

The face-saving model of politeness, as presented by Brown and Levinson, presupposes that face is always at risk of being lost or threatened; thus, it is considered in everyone's interest to maintain each other's face by avoiding the performance of face-threatening acts. Face-threatening acts refer to actions of the speaker that are contrary to the positive and negative face needs of the addressee. Positive politeness strategies means using language to mitigate the speech acts that threaten the positive face needs of the addressee (e.g., when disagreeing, saying "guys, are you sure about your answer?" instead of an outright disagreement like "I disagree."). To use positive politeness means to invoke belonging and shared common ground. Negative politeness strategies involve the use of language that conveys the speaker's wish to minimise imposition and respect the addressee's need to be free from imposition (e.g., when requesting, saying "I was wondering if you might have a minute to..."). In other words, to be linguistically polite means to use expressions that soften any form of communication that might threaten the positive face and the negative face needs of the addressee.

## 1.2 Face-threatening acts

There are times when the need to perform a face-threatening act outweighs

the need to save face. The politeness theory encompasses four super strategies, ordered according to the seriousness of the face-threatening act that speakers can employ when they have the occasion to perform an act contrary to the positive and negative face needs of the hearer.

[1] Do the face-threatening act **on-record, baldly without redress**, which means being direct and unambiguous such as a professor saying to a student, "This kind of academic writing is not acceptable."

[2] Do the face-threatening act with **positive politeness**, which means using language that preserves group belonging and common ground. For example, the use of 'we' in "We should discuss how we can improve this essay" not only mitigates negative feedback but includes both professor and student in the activity.

[3] Do the face-threatening act with **negative politeness**, which entails the use of redressive language addressed to the hearer's negative face or the need to be freed from imposition. A professor might tell a student, "I know you're really busy and have several articles to work on, but the office requires a re-submission by next Friday."

[4] **Do the face-threatening act off-record**, which can entail indirectly criticising the student's work without committing one's self to the act of criticising. The professor might say "I imagine you've been really busy with your part-time job" instead of addressing the poor quality of the student's essay directly.

There is a fifth strategy, "**Do not do the face-threatening act**," but because of the difficulty in knowing when speakers refrain from performing a face-threatening act, it will not be the concern of this study.

Although Brown & Levinson's politeness theory has been criticized on

various grounds (see Driscoll, 2007; Arundale, 2006; Watts, 2003; Eelen, 2001; Culpeper, 1996; Meier, 1995; Nwoye, 1992; Gu, 1990; Matsumoto, 1989), it has been found to be useful in this study. Its comprehensive lexicogrammatical framework allowed for a detailed micro-analysis and served as a powerful tool for sharpening the analytic eye.

## **2. Related literature: The interplay between power and politeness in language**

This article explores the *discursively and interactionally constructed* manifestations of power which in Brown & Levinson's (1987) view is "the degree to which individuals can impose their plans and self-evaluation at the expense of other people's plans and self-evaluation" (p. 77). It is suggested that the difference in power between speaker and hearer will influence their discursive practices. For example, those in more powerful positions will have less need for polite or redressed language when talking to those with less power; those with less power will tend to use heavily mitigated language when addressing those who are considerably higher in rank, status or authority.

The complex interplay between power and politeness has been extensively explored within workplace and institutional settings. As Fairclough (1992, p. 204) asserts, the manifestations of power and status are at their sharpest in formal interactions. Although Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that the more powerful interlocutor will tend to use direct and less polite language towards subordinates, several studies provide evidence to the contrary. In her investigation into British courtrooms and police stations, Harris (2003) found that people in powerful positions use heavily

mitigated language when addressing less powerful hearers. Indeed, Holmes and Stubbe (2003, p. 40), drawing from their study of workplace interactions, state that those with institutional power and authority try to achieve a balance between getting their subordinates to do a good job and showing consideration for their subordinates' feelings. Koester (2006, p. 115), in her corpus analysis of workplace discourse, maintains that "getting someone to perform an action creates a discursive imbalance which the discursively dominant speaker often seems to try to offset by using relational strategies (...)."

Other studies highlight how the use of linguistic politeness negotiates symmetry and asymmetry, thus re-shaping power relations between interactants. Takano (2004), in a study of nine employment settings in Japan, reported that Japanese women in positions of power constantly switched between powerful and less powerful speech to achieve specific interactional goals. If they wanted cooperation, for instance, they invoked solidarity and collegiality but when rules needed to be enforced, they called upon institutional power. Vine's (2004) findings about female managers and employees in a New Zealand workplace indicate that social distance and power are constantly negotiated. Holmes and Stubbe (2003) and Holmes, Stubbe and Vine (1999) drew from a corpus of varied workplace encounters to describe how polite language is used to mitigate power in the workplace. Diamond (1996), using data from a psychotherapy training organisation in Switzerland, argued that politeness can be used to achieve more power (p. 73). It is claimed that individuals who want to seek or maintain power might choose to present an outward appearance of being concerned and respectful of other people's feelings, when

in fact they have self-serving ulterior motives. As Holmes, Stubbe and Vine (1999, p. 355) suggest, politeness can be deployed to mask a manipulative, transactional goal.

Although there is a wealth of power and politeness studies in workplace contexts, there seems to be a conspicuous lack of research activity exploring higher education discourse. At the time of writing, there is none involving Philippine contexts to my knowledge. Two studies that are most similar to the current one but show contradictory findings are those of Rees-Miller's (2000, 1995) and Morand's (2000, 1996). Rees-Miller investigated linguistic markers that are used to soften and strengthen disagreements in an American university. Her results show that 'high power' professors used linguistic markers of politeness more frequently than 'low power' students even in cases of disagreements. Morand explored the linguistic realization of the effects of power differential using data from 84 American university students. The students were asked to engage in four role plays and perform face-threatening acts while interacting with a hypothetical other. The findings, consistent with Brown and Levinson's model, showed that speakers with less power tend to be more linguistically polite compared to speakers with higher relative power; those with more power were less linguistically polite when interacting with lower power addressees.

Dogancay-Aktuna and Kamisli (1996), in their research involving 80 native speakers of Turkish, used questionnaires as their main data collection tool. Their study showed how hypothetical professors, without feeling any need for redressive action, used direct language when disagreeing and correcting mistakes of lower status interlocutors. These professors were also claimed to be

concerned with building rapport and solidarity.

It is of relevance in this article to note that, whereas Rees-Miller (2000, 1995) focussed on naturally occurring data, Morand (2000, 1996) and Dogancay-Aktuna & Kamisli (1996) analysed elicited data. It can be argued that performing face-threatening acts while doing a role play or filling out self-report questionnaires might not be an accurate reflection of how the participants actually speak. There might be a difference between what people say in real life and what they think they should say in hypothetical situations. As Morand (1996) states, "performing a face-threatening act toward a potentially reactive face may cause speakers to express more politeness than they did toward the imagined face in the experiment" (p. 552).

To sum up, the previous studies reviewed above suggest that first, power is constantly 'worked on' in institutional discourse (whether asserted, softened, downplayed or subverted); second, its negotiation and linguistic realization often involve politeness strategies which serve to mitigate face-threatening acts.

### 3. Method

The data being analysed here is part of a larger corpus involving 25 hours of classroom observation (12 hours MA classes, 13 hours undergraduate) from four higher education institutions (two universities and two colleges) in the Philippines collected in May 2008. To gather data, a fly-on-the wall, non-participant observer approach was adopted. Two voice digital recorders, which are no bigger than the average mobile phone and therefore quite inconspicuous, were used to record spoken discourse. One was placed on top of the teacher's desk and the other one was positioned where the researcher was

seated. The audio recordings were transcribed upon completion of data collection and then analysed using Brown and Levinson's lexico-grammatical model, shown in Appendix 1. Due to

space limitations, this paper focusses only on three undergraduate classes, shown below, which were each observed on two occasions.

**Figure 1. Overview of the classes observed**

	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Student profile</b>
<b>P1</b> (Professor 1) Male	Literature	14 S (students): 7 Males, 7 Females Age: 16-20
<b>P2</b> Female	Academic Writing	14 S: 13 Males, 1 Female Age: 16-20
<b>P3</b> Female	Patient Care & Nutrition	41 S: 6 Males, 35 Females Age: 16-20

P1 and P2 teach in UPM, a private university located in urban Metro Manila; P3 teaches for CPN, a private college in the city outskirts (names are pseudonyms). P1 and P2 used a discussion type discovery approach, while P3 preferred a lecture format. During the two visits, P1's class was discussing a classic novel and a selection of English poems. P2 was using an article on water conservation to teach students how to write an argumentative essay. During the first observation, P3 gave a lecture on patient care; in the second visit, she talked about nutrition.

The unit of analysis was based on the concept of 'elicitation sequence' which in the current study is a completed interaction sequence between professors and students consisting of a directive in the form of a question and the accompanying response. Due to the institutional nature of the discourse, it can be argued that a question is a type of directive demanding an action in the form of a response (Dalton-Puffer & Nikula, 2006, p. 243).

#### 4. Results and discussion

Bald on-record elicitation sequences, as shown in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 below, were used most frequently by all three professors. This is to be expected considering the institutional context of the discourse. As Dalton-Puffer and Nikula (2006) claim,

transmission and/or co-construction of knowledge is so central to the teacher's job description that there are two acts of interpersonal communication which are completely sanctioned by the purpose of the institution: giving information and demanding information about the student's state of mind or state of knowledge. (p. 244)

When teachers want a display of knowledge, they use bald on-record questions. For example, they ask "What is

the capital of the Philippines” rather than mitigating the utterance with something like “I was wondering if perhaps you could...” However, when performing potentially face-threatening acts such as correcting a mistake, checking for understanding and giving orders in the

form of homework, the professors in the study invoked a mixture of positive and negative politeness strategies, albeit more of the former. I return to this point later with excerpts from the data for illustration.

**Table 1: Professor 1, UPM**

Politeness strategies	N	%
Bald on Record	139	71
Mitigated with Positive Politeness	48	24
Mitigated with Negative Politeness	10	5
Total number of elicitation sequences	197	100

**Table 2: Professor 2, UPM**

Politeness strategies	N	%
Bald on Record	71	42
Mitigated with Positive Politeness	63	37
Mitigated with Negative Politeness	35	21
Total number of elicitation sequences	169	100

**Table 3: Professor 3, CPN**

Politeness strategies	N	%
Bald on Record	24	42
Mitigated with Positive Politeness	12	37
Mitigated with Negative Politeness	2	21
Total number of elicitation sequences	38	100

As shown above, positive politeness follows bald on-record as the most preferred strategy to mitigate face-threatening acts. Negative politeness was the least preferred strategy. P3 has the

least number of elicitation sequences because of the lecture format of the class.

*Humour* was extensively used in P1’s class, with *intensifying interest* and *using in-group identity markers* as the second and third preferred strategy. All 15

of Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategies were present in P2's class with *humour*, *avoiding disagreement* and *noticing/attending to H* as the three most frequently used. P3's most frequent strategies were *giving the gift of sympathy* and *avoiding disagreement*.

Brown and Levinson identified 10 negative politeness strategies as shown in Appendix 1, however, only three types were found in the data as used by the professors: be conventionally indirect, question/hedge and minimize the imposition. This probably reflects the relative informality of the classes (further evidenced by the use of humour as a positive politeness strategy). As Holmes (1995, p. 20) claims, negative politeness strategies are used more often in formal situations, whereas positive politeness devices tend to occur in intimate and more informal situations.

- |    |    |   |
|----|----|---|
| 1  | S1 | erm, I think it's the sunset  |
| 2  | P1 | sunset?   |
| 3  | S1 | because erm the stars that shine on Milky Way it symbolises the sun rise or sun = |
| 4  | P  | =sun?   |
| 5  | S1 | it says "along the margin of a bay so it's setting =                              |
| 6  | P  | =what's setting   |
| 7  | S1 | =the sun  |
| 8  | P  | the sun is setting,   |
| 9  | S1 | 'they stretched in never-ending line' means the rays of the sun?                  |
| 10 | P  | wait, so would you say they stretched, the sun's rays? What is 'they?'            |
| 11 | S2 | flowers?  |
| 12 | P  | huh?  |
| 13 | S2 | flowers?  |
| 14 | P  | the FLOWERS! 'they' is the flowers <u>right?</u> 'stretched in never-             |
| 15 |    | ending line' what what is 'continuous as the stars' literally what?               |
| 16 | S2 | the daffodils   |
| 17 | P  | the flowers again! <u>Ok?</u>   |

P1's utterance in line 2 *sunset* is an implied challenge to S1's interpretation using 'lexical repetition' which, according to Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 112), can be used to stress interest and to show that one has heard correctly (strategy 1

#### 4.1 Illustrative examples: Performing and mitigating face-threatening acts

In this section, selected excerpts from the data demonstrate how the professors in the study protect their students' faces by mitigating potentially face-threatening actions such as error correction, checking for understanding and giving homework. Transcription conventions are found in Appendix 2.

##### *Example 1 Correcting a mistake*

The example below illustrates how P1, a male professor, typically corrects a 'mistake' in his class. P1 was asking a student (S1), a male, about his interpretation of a poem.

'notice/attend to H'). It can also be P1's way of giving S1 a chance to change his answer. From S1's justification in line 3, it can be inferred that he took P1's repetition as a challenge. In lines 4, 6 and 9, P1 continues without giving the correct

answer. In lines 11 and 16, S2 gives the correct interpretation and P1 confirms that the correct answer is *flowers*. P1's tag questions *right?* in line 14 and *ok?* in line 17 are positive politeness devices, that of seeking agreement. P1 then asks the students to interpret the figurative use of *wealth* in the poem, but as can be seen below, he did not offer a correction but

- 1 S3 pleasure?  
 2 P1 pleasure? why?  
 3 S3 (silence) (.3)  
 4 P1 ok when you see something nice, sure, pleasure  
 5 but it's more than just that

Immediately after having interaction with a positive politeness committed face-threatening acts when redress: correcting S1 and S3 above, P1 closed the

- 1 P1 what do you call that a memory candy or something your happy candy  
 2 your thought candy or something, it's something he can pull out of his  
 3 memory bank when he's getting low or feeling bored, think back, do  
 4 you guys do that? (referring to S1 and S3)

P1 used several markers of positive politeness: in-group language or slang (*memory/happy candy*), thereby claiming common ground; use of *you guys* which presupposes familiarity softening a face-threatening act, use of vague language (*or something*) which relies on the "inevitable association with shared knowledge" (p.111) and bald on-record *think back* which carries an intimate, familiar tone. Bringing up the topic of *memory candy* is another positive politeness strategy – 'to seek agreement by raising safe topics' (p. 112). Evidence that the above positive politeness strategies were meant to be restorative is seen when P1 nominated S1 and S3, whose interpretations he corrected, to talk

instead re-voiced S3's answer in line 2. He added the question word *why* to scaffold the student to the more correct answer, but was just met with silence in line 3. To save S3's face, P1 in line 5 acknowledges and partially agrees with S3's reply with a hedged *but it's more than just that*.

about their *happy candy* (lines 3 and 4 above).

### **Example 2 Checking for understanding**

Teachers often check to make sure that students have understood a particular topic before moving on to the next lesson. Oftentimes this is done in a swift straightforward manner (e.g., "understood?" or "is that clear?" or "are you with me so far?") before the next topic or activity is introduced. However, as the extract below illustrates, P3 needed to make sure that the students had full understanding of the lesson.

- 1 P3 I just hope you know 'TENACIOUS.' *Baka* ((maybe)) you write it  
 2 there without knowing it. *Naintindihan nyo?* ((Do you understand?))  
 3 *Kasi po mahirap talaga.* ((Because *po* it is really difficult)). You need  
 4 to know this by heart.

P3 had just finished reading a section from an overhead transparency containing the word *tenacious*. She was making sure that the students knew what it meant. Her tone, which to me sounded sarcastic and disapproving, is lexically signalled by the use of the respect particle *po* in line 3. *Po* is used to show distance towards people the speaker does not know well or as a form of deference to those who are older or with higher social status/authority. P3 is older and with

higher social status and authority, so by using *po*, she is conveying off-record sarcasm (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 220), which P3 confirmed in an informal chat after class. In line 2, P3's question *Naiintinindihan ninyo ito* (Do you understand?) is quite direct because of the pronoun 'you.' In the extract below, P3 uses *Naiintinindihan ninyo ito* three times. She used 'why' six times with an irritated and frustrated tone.

- 1 P3 WHY, WHY do you need to know these things?  
 2 Ss (silence)  
 3 P3 why, WHY nursing diagnosis facilitates quality care?  
 4 Ss (silence)  
 5 P3 WHY WHY do you think? what's nursing diagnosis?  
 6 NAAINTINDIHAN NINYO BA? Why, NAAINTINDIHAN NINYO BA?  
 ((do you understand?)) ((do you understand?))  
 7 Ss (silence)  
 8 P3 (looking, with raised eyebrows, specifically at one student)  
 9 S1 (stands up) Assessment is important *po. Para* makapag-plan.  
 ((In order to make a plan))  
 10 P3 OK exactly! diagnosis will lead to a plan. *Naiintindihan ninyo?*  
 ((do you understand?))  
 11 Ss *Opo* Yes (mixed)

P3's repetition of *why* and tone of voice can be inferred as a demand for an answer which threatens the students' positive and negative face. She downgraded the face-threatening act from line 1 which is a very general question (*Why do you need to know these things?*) to being more specific in line 3 (*why, WHY nursing diagnosis facilitates quality care?*) to line 5 hedged by *think* (*WHY WHY do you think?*) She eventually reduced the difficulty of the question to a *what* (*what's nursing diagnosis?*).

The lack of response from the students is face-threatening to P3 and her outburst is a threat to the positive face of the students. According to Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 66), expression of out-of-control emotions is face-threatening to the addressee, indicating the speaker's

lack of consideration for the addressee's feelings and wants. This interpretation, however, needs to be understood in the light of the surrounding context. P3 was very disappointed with the students' poor performance in an exam which had been given a few days before data collection. The implications of the exam results are serious – for one, the students might not qualify for professional certification; more importantly, patients' lives can be endangered if students make grave mistakes. P3 had emphasised to the students the importance of asking questions, which explains the face-threatening, emotionally loaded stance of *naiintindihan ninyo?* ((do you understand?)). It can be inferred that P3 used impoliteness strategically to emphasise a point, which she probably

thought was more important than face-saving.

### Example 3 Giving homework

Giving homework is part of the teachers' job. Students expect and are expected to do school assignments outside of the class hours. The excerpts from P2's

class illustrate that the speech act of giving an order is a complicated four-step process. Based on the level of mitigation, it can be inferred that P2 considers giving a three-page essay for homework to be a threat to the students' negative face (the need to be freed from imposition).

#### Step 1 Paving the ground for a face-threatening act

- |   |    |   |
|---|----|---|
| 1 | P2 | so, question, 'am I going to write a <i>ten-page</i> essay for my |
| 2 |    | argumentative essay to persuade?' the answer is no, ok?           |
| 3 | S  | ok twenty? (in a light-hearted tone)                              |
| 4 | Ss | (laughter)  |
| 5 | P2 | (laughs) NOT twenty, twenty is already a research paper           |
| 6 | Ss | (laughter)  |

Line 1 above illustrates P2's use of linguistic resources to attend to the negative and positive face wants of her students. By using active voicing 'am I going to write...' she is presupposing to know what her students' concerns are (positive politeness strategy 9). Her choice of the word *ten* (*ten-page essay*) is

negative politeness strategy 4 'minimise the size of the imposition' (which will become clearer in the next extract). In effect, she has already redressed the face-threatening act even before verbalising it. P2 proceeds to deliver her face threatening directive:

#### Step 2 Redressing face-threatening acts

- |    |    |   |
|----|----|---|
| 7  | P2 | I want you to write MAY::BE between a three to five page essay,         |
| 8  |    | depends on how heavy your topic was. some people have very              |
| 9  |    | difficult topics, some people have easier ones ok? erm so we will       |
|    |    | start   |
| 10 |    | doing the writing next week so I want you to start getting getting      |
|    |    | the   |
| 11 |    | books so that Monday I want you to have the books with you. the         |
|    |    | only  |
| 12 |    | way to write at all is for you to have the books first ok? so           |
|    |    | tomorrow  |
| 13 |    | <u>read pages 158 to 160</u> that's what we will discuss. <u>I hope</u> |
| 14 |    | <u>we'll end a little bit</u> earlier cuz it's any way a Friday erm ok? |

In line 7, P2 says that it is not a *ten* but actually a *three to five page* essay that she wants the students to write, so the 'imaginary' huge imposition (*ten-page* essay) in line 1 has already been

minimised and hedged by the use of *maybe*. In line 13, she gives a bald on-record order (*read page 158 to 160*) which signals that she considers the reading assignment not face-threatening at all. In

lines 13 and 14 (*I hope we'll end...Friday*) she uses positive politeness strategy 10 'give an offer or promise.' According to Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 125), speakers may stress their cooperation with the hearers by claiming that whatever it is the hearers want, they want for them too and will help to obtain it. So, P2 is presupposing that the students would like to go home earlier on a Friday and she can help make this possible. Positive

politeness strategy 14 'assume or assert reciprocity' is also contained in lines 13 and 14 by 'fulfilling H's want for some X' (p. 129). P2 can thus be said to have satisfied her students' positive face want by giving them gifts of sympathy, understanding and cooperation.

After line 14, there is a question from one of the students about when the assignment is due (not included in this article). P2 then continues:

### Step 3 The penultimate blow: Negotiating symmetry

21 P2 I'm just talking about what we will do tomorrow. It's just one  
short  
22 essay, three page which I assume we will finish MUCH faster  
than  
23 the ten-page we did today right? ok ? and I want you to start  
getting  
24 your sources so that on Monday we have time to take notes in class ok  
25 YOU CAN actually start taking notes erm at home on Saturday  
and  
26 Sunday while I labour checking your test papers ok coz I still  
have not  
27 finished the (coughs)  
28 the short seat work I gave so maybe two or three more and then  
your  
29 actual essays. I normally spend my weekends checking ok  
(laughs)

Lines 21 to 29 are interspersed with the inclusive pronoun *we*, thus attending to the solidarity needs of the students. As Brown and Levinson (p. 127) state, using an inclusive 'we' form when 'you' or 'me' is meant, "call upon the cooperative assumptions and thereby redress face-threatening acts." The use of

*just* two times in line 21 is a negative politeness device aimed at minimising the imposition. Lines 26 and 29 can be interpreted as positive politeness strategy 9 'assume and assert reciprocity' (p. 129) implying that "I'll do X for you, so do Y for me."

### Step 4 Upgraded face-saving to cushion face-threat

The extracts below were taken the day after; P2 is referring back to the essay mentioned the day before.

1 that, I would like you to do on Monday.  
2 I'm LETTING you off early, in fact

- 3            half an hour early ok (.3) so that there will be no excuse not to  
have
- 4            any materials for- on Monday okay you have you have plenty of  
time
- 5            so get your notes first so by next week you already have an  
outline.
- 6            We'll revise your thesis here so that you don't have to worry  
about it
- 7            at home. Write your essay Friday Saturday Sunday at home ok,
- 8            So okay that's our game plan for next week. Ok thank you.

The excerpt above highlights how P2's institutional power interfaces with face-saving politeness. Line 3, *so that there will be no excuses* embodies her authority. Notice that this voice of authority, while carrying force, is still mitigated by the use of a general and agent-less construction. Instead of saying *you won't have any excuses*, P2 uses *there will be no excuse*.

Line 7 carries the clearest and most face-threatening utterance, bald on-

P2        So okay that's our game plan for next week.

In the above, *so* is used to mark 'pseudo-agreement' when in fact there was none (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 115) and *our* implies co-operative effort when the plan seems to be just P2's. It can be argued that the whole utterance *that's our game plan* is P2's way of emphasising power, quite similar to the use of tactical summaries in negotiations where one of the parties presents a summing up move that's favourable to their cause and unfavourable to the interlocutor (Charles & Charles, 1999, p. 74). *Game plan* can also be viewed as P2's use of metaphor to evoke shared common ground indicating that professor and students belong to the same team.

#### 4.2 Positive politeness for the powerful

A fine-grained analysis of the above examples served to unpack how the

record, unmitigated *write your essay Friday Saturday Sunday at home ok*, which is an impingement on the students' negative face want or the need to be freed from imposition. The *ok* at the end seems to soften the speech act of commanding especially because it is said with a slightly rising intonation, and thus, can be viewed as a positive politeness device 'to seek an agreement.' P2 concludes the lesson with:

professors' concern for their students' face needs influenced their linguistic choices. Although correcting students' mistakes, checking for understanding and giving homework are an intrinsic part of their job, they managed to cushion the potentially face-damaging effects of those acts by using positive and negative politeness devices. They showed restraint in exercising their institutionally vested power, which suggests that they place a high value on solidarity and group harmony.

The extensive use of positive politeness to equalize the power differential and neutralize face-threatening acts resonates with the findings of Rees-Miller (2000, 1995), Morand (2000, 1996) and Dogancay-Aktuna and Kamisli (1996). It does appear that those with more power have the prerogative to initiate informality, friendliness and

intimacy but not the lower power speakers. As Morand (1996) claims, power is a “license” for doing positive politeness where there is a “set of speaking rights issued only to social superiors” (p. 552).

It will be recalled that humour, a positive politeness strategy, was frequently used by P1 and P2 in their classrooms. Holmes (2000) maintains that humour is also a way of doing power less explicitly making it “more acceptable in context where informality is valued and status differences are played down” (p. 176). It can also be argued that linguistic politeness is used by the professors as a communicative resource with which to slide up and down the power scale. Like the Japanese executives in Takano’s (2005, p. 656) research, a similar strategy is deployed by the Filipino professors in the study. The findings suggest that mitigated language enables the ‘high power’ professors to subvert their hierarchical superiority. By sharing common ground with their ‘lower power’ students, they gain more cooperation and empathy. On the other hand, by highlighting asymmetry through the use of bald-on record directives, professors re-establish their status as ‘supreme authority’ and therefore can legitimize their demand for compliance.

In this study, the linguistic strategies used by three professors in Philippine higher education were explored. A discourse analytic approach using Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory as explanatory framework indicates that the participants in the study deployed linguistic politeness to come closer to their students. They actively used a mix of positive politeness strategies – claiming common ground, conveying co-operation and fulfilling students’ need (for sympathy, understanding, etc.) – when performing the potentially face-threatening acts of correcting students’

errors, checking for understanding and giving homework. The use of these solidarity-building resources reduced the power differential in the classroom enabling the ‘high power’ professors to come down to the level of their students. Therefore, they are able to achieve the goals of the lesson while at the same time attending to the relational needs of the students. The study also suggests that using linguistic politeness in the classroom may not just be about protecting and preserving the students’ or the professors’ public face; it is not just about establishing harmonious relations; linguistic politeness, it seems, is a precondition for doing power.

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### Appendix 1 Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies

Negative Politeness	Positive Politeness	Off-record
<p><b>Be direct</b></p> <p>1: Be conventionally indirect</p> <p><b>Don't presume/assume</b></p> <p>2: Question, hedge</p> <p><b>Don't coerce H</b></p> <p>3: Be pessimistic</p> <p>4: Minimize the imposition</p> <p>5: Give deference</p> <p><b>Communicate S's want not to impinge on H</b></p> <p>6: Apologize</p> <p>7: Impersonalize S and H</p> <p>8: State the face threatening act as a general rule</p> <p>9: Nominalize</p> <p><b>Redress other wants of H's</b></p> <p>10: Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebteding H</p>	<p><b>Claim Common Ground</b></p> <p>1: Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods)</p> <p>2: Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)</p> <p>3: Intensify interest to H</p> <p>4: Use in-group identity markers</p> <p>5: Seek agreement</p> <p>6: Avoid disagreement</p> <p>7: Presuppose/raise/assert common ground</p> <p>8: Joke</p> <p><b>Convey that S and H are co-operators</b></p> <p>9: Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants</p> <p>10: Offer, promise</p> <p>11: Be optimistic</p> <p>12: Include both S and H in the activity</p> <p>13: Give (or ask for) reasons</p> <p>14: Assume or assert reciprocity</p> <p><b>Fulfil H's wants</b></p> <p>15: Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)</p>	<p><b>Invite conversational implicatures</b></p> <p>1: Give hints</p> <p>2: Give association clues</p> <p>3: Presuppose</p> <p>4: Understate</p> <p>5: Overstate</p> <p>6: Use tautologies</p> <p>7: Use contradictions</p> <p>8: Be ironic</p> <p>9: Use metaphors</p> <p>10: Use rhetorical questions</p> <p><b>Be vague or ambiguous: violate the manner maxim</b></p> <p>11: Be ambiguous</p> <p>12: Be vague</p> <p>13: Over-generalize</p> <p>14: Displace H</p> <p>15: Be incomplete, use ellipsis</p>

**Appendix 2 Transcription conventions**

(???)	unintelligible text
(word?)	guess at unclear text: e.g. I (apologize?) for the delay in shipment
(.2)	length of pause in seconds
::	noticeable lengthening of a vowel
.	falling intonation at end of tone unit
?	high rising intonation at end of tone unit
,	slightly rising intonation at end of tone unit
!	animated intonation
-	unfinished utterance, e.g., false start
WORD	Words written in capitals to indicate emphatic stress: e.g. VERY
=	latching, no perceptible pause after a turn
(laughs)	single brackets describe current action, transcriber's comments
(( ))	double brackets contain English translation of Pilipino words: e.g. A: <i>Isulat mo ito.</i> ((Write this down.))