

BUILDING RAPPORT IN AN ONLINE COMMUNITY VIA POSITIVE POLITENESS STRATEGIES

Petra Trávníčková

Abstract

The present paper concentrates on the role of politeness strategies in on-line groups formed around an Internet message board dedicated to dieting and offering support as well as information. As the concept of weight is a sensitive part of people's identity, it produces face-threatening acts as defined by Brown and Levinson (1978). It is positive politeness that is said to prevail in women's and in-group language (Coates 1993, 2003, Holmes 1993, 1995, 2006); hence the aim of this paper is to show which positive politeness strategies are used to minimize these threats and how they differ depending on participants' sex. Moreover, it also intends to examine how positive politeness strategies function to enhance community spirit and keep an on-line community alive.

Key words

asynchronous computer-mediated communication, positive politeness strategies, face, gender

1 Introduction

1.1 Asynchronous computer-mediated communication

Since the 1990s when people started to communicate via the quickly-developing Internet technology, text-based computer-mediated communication (henceforth referred to as CMC) has become increasingly commonplace. Together with synchronous chatting, asynchronous communication in the so-called discussion or message boards quickly grew in popularity. Asynchronous CMC is defined as communication performed by means of computers or other electronic devices with a delayed answer. Despite its asynchronicity, like chatting, it is often compared to face-to-face conversation (Cherry 1999, Crystal 2001, Herring 2001).

However, there are three major differences: as opposed to face-to-face conversation, there are usually multiple users in CMC; hence it is referred to as an 'on-line polylogue' (Marococcia 2004: 116), or 'multiparty conversation on-line' (Crystal 2001: 129), resembling a cocktail party (Crystal 2001: 159). Secondly, the other distinct feature of asynchronous CMC is its public character, as the posted messages can be read by anybody who is logged on the Internet, unless it is prohibited otherwise. Finally, the third major difference is the absence of paralinguistic means used in face-to-face conversation and technological

constraints imposed by the fact that it is in fact speaking via writing. As opposed to real-life speaking, which employs multiple channels, CMC takes place only via “visually presented language” (Herring 2001: 612). Nevertheless, CMC is by no means impoverished, contrary to popular belief, as these limitations are compensated by typography, pictures, emoticons, etc. However, the aim of this paper is to analyse mainly the text and it does not examine nonverbal communication devices in detail, even though they do contribute to promoting politeness as well (for more on visualisation of writing, see Trávníková 2012).

Furthermore, what most message/discussion boards have in common is the forming of communities. It is fascinating how quickly an on-line group develops the feeling of mutuality and cooperation and very soon starts to behave like a real-life community, even though its participants have actually never met in person. People come to discussion boards to exchange information and experience, or just to talk about everyday topics. The interpersonal function is of primary importance here; on-line groups then develop their own interactional patterns that help them to enhance the community spirit. Furthermore, they also develop their strategies, routines and their own language code.

Despite the frequent claim that it is impossible to be certain of gender or other identity characteristics of people participating in Internet discussions, contemporary research (e.g. Herring 1996a) dismisses this opinion as unjustified. Panyamtheekul and Herring (2003: Part 2) argue that

despite early claims that CMC filtered out social cues and was therefore gender neutral, research has found that gender remains socially important online. For example, Herring (1992, 1993, 1996, 1998, 2003) found systematic differences in the participation patterns and discourse styles of males and females in both asynchronous and synchronous CMC.

Furthermore, they even add that conclusions concerning language and gender reached in the field of CMC research resemble research findings in face-to-face conversation.

1.2 Politeness

Ever since politeness entered the spotlight of linguistic research in the late 1970s when the wave of interest was triggered by Leech and Brown and Levinson, it has become one of the key concepts in modern linguistics. It is said to go hand-in-hand with language and social reality (Eelen 2001: 1). The social character of politeness is also evident when taking into account the linguistic disciplines

dealing with this concept: psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, conversation and discourse analyses, ethnography, and, above all, pragmatics and sociolinguistics. According to Thomas (1996: 149), politeness is especially associated with pragmatics; she even refers to it as a sub-discipline of pragmatics.

Modern linguists have become more and more aware of the fact that people are inherently sociable and have a great need to interact and communicate with others. Consequently, politeness studies can facilitate smooth and efficient communication and, conversely, ignoring politeness can result in miscommunication and even conflict. As Xie (2003: 811) argues, “where there is communication, there is [sic] politeness studies”.

As for the delineation of politeness itself, it must be pointed out that even though the concept has been studied for over forty years, researchers are often accused of ignoring its very core and failing to define it properly (Fraser 1990, Kasper 1990, Thomas 1996, Cameron 2001, Eelen 2001). In the early 1990s, Fraser expresses his astonishment at the inconsistency among researchers on the definition of politeness, and Kasper (1990: 194) calls for “conceptualisation of politeness and ... the linguistic enactment of politeness”. Moreover, over a decade later, Eelen (2001: i) argues that “the notion has received a myriad of different definitions and interpretations, ranging from a general principle of language use governing all interpersonal aspects of interaction to the use of specific linguistic forms and formulae”. He also criticizes vagueness and the lack of unison. Likewise, Xie (2003: 812) also claims that politeness is a rather fuzzy and unclear field of study and she blames it on its determinacy by culture; every politeness theory reflects particular cultural values. Not surprisingly, she stresses that pragmatics itself is of the same ‘disorganised’ character.

The following are among the most noteworthy approaches to politeness studies: the social-norm view going back to history, conversational-maxim view (Lakoff 1973, Leech 1983), face-saving view (Brown & Levinson 1978), conversational-contract view (Fraser & Nolen 1981) and pragmatic-scale view (Spencer-Oatey 2002).

The material under investigation will be analysed in the framework of the face-saving view, often regarded as the core approach in politeness studies. The central place in Brown and Levinson’s theory is assumed to be the notion of *face*, which is defined as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting of two related aspects” (Brown & Levinson 1978: 67). *Negative face* is associated with every individual’s freedom to act as they wish and not to be distracted by others, and *positive face* expresses every human being’s wish to be appreciated and approved of. In their pioneering work, the authors give comprehensive lists of *face-threatening acts (FTAs)*, classified

according to the kind of face threatened; they give examples of strategies used in particular face-threatening situations (Brown & Levinson 1978: 70-71).

Brown and Levinson's concept of politeness principally has a *social function*. Eelen (2001: 5) emphasises that in their view, politeness is fundamental to the very structure of social life and society, and provides a verbal way to relieve the interpersonal tension arising from communicative intentions that conflict with social needs and statuses.

The present research deals with a message board related to dieting and losing weight. Talking about one's weight definitely represents a threat to one's face. In our culture, one's weight, and women's weight in particular, is a topic so frequently discussed in the media that it becomes an obsession for many women (and even for some men). Therefore, talking about one's weight is considered to be potentially offensive. Hence it could be suspected that there will be face-threatening acts arising from the delicate topic and that the contributors in the examined message board will employ politeness strategies to reduce this threat. Besides minimizing FTAs, these strategies also serve to enhance the spirit of mutuality in the community.

This spirit of mutuality, or in other words rapport, is directly related to what Brown and Levinson (1978: 107) call claiming common ground. In their scheme of positive politeness strategies classified into several subcategories, it is subgroup 5.3.1. This subcategory will be the starting point for the analysis.

1.3 Politeness and gender

In the final part of the introduction, a brief insight will be given into the relationship between politeness and gender, as the analysis concentrates on the difference between men's and women's language. The relationship between language and gender has been dealt with for several decades but with little consensus (Macaulay 2001: 293). In the past, linguists arrived at the conclusion that women are more polite than men (Brown 1998: 81). In the 1970s, Lakoff (2004: 78) claimed that, for instance, women use more hedges than men and their word stock is related to their interests, such as needlework. Furthermore, she stated that women tend to use "hypercorrect" grammar and "superpolite" forms (i.e. they use polite phrases such as *please* or *thank you* and they do not swear), and they do not tell jokes. According to Holmes (1993: 96), Lakoff's basic features of women's language depicted women as "hesitant, unconfident, spineless creatures, unwilling to assert their opinions in case they offended others ...". Even though the reasons for the argument that women are more polite (i.e. women's sense of inferiority and feeling of insecurity in the world of men) are

by now outdated in Western civilization, the relationship between language and gender still remains unclear and widely discussed by scholars. As opposed to Lakoff, Tannen (1994) attributes the differences between men's and women's ways of speaking to cultural differences between the two sexes and she refutes men's dominance over women.

As for asynchronous CMC, it is claimed that similarly to spoken conversation, in online public boards women also tend to

be more polite, supportive, emotionally expressive, and less verbose than men. Conversely, men are more likely to insult, challenge, express sarcasm, use profanity, and send long messages. Discussion groups dominated by males have also been observed to use more impersonal, fact-oriented language (Herring & Paolillo 2006: 442).

It has been generalised that "male users are concerned primarily with the exchange of information, while female users send e-mail primarily to promote and maintain interpersonal relationships" (Herring 1996b: 810).

1.4 Politeness and CMC

As has already been stressed, there is vivid communication and a dense network of social relationships on the Internet; thus it is clear that CMC should be studied from the perspective of politeness as well. Recently, this field of interest has also appeared in analyzing Internet discourse and there are a number of studies concerning politeness within computer-mediated communication. Just to name a few examples, Hobbs (2003) dealt with politeness strategies in men's and women's mail messages; Lewis (2005) with arguing in English and French asynchronous discussion; Macaulay (2001) with indirectness in requests for information on the Internet; Graham (2007) examined conflict, (im)politeness and identity in a computer-mediated community; and Kouper (2010) addressed politeness strategies in peer advice in an online community.

2 Material and methodology

The corpus comprises three threads from a single message board dedicated to the topic of dieting and losing weight, which can be found on www.3fatchicks.com. This topic is regarded as a typical 'women's' topic. The message board used as the source for this study, *Three Fat Chicks on a Diet*, is one of the many topic-bound message boards; other frequently discussed 'women's' topics in

other message boards are, for example, weddings, conceiving a child, parenting, plastic surgery and fashion. A vast majority of contributors here are women; there was only one thread dedicated primarily to male users in the entire message board.

In two of the threads (*30-Somethings* and *Slimming World Support Thread*) under investigation, there are almost entirely only women participants; the third thread (*Men's Support Thread*) consists of messages posted by men. The sex of each participant is easily discernible; by clicking on the nickname in the contribution, others acquire a more or less profound characteristic of the particular user including also his or her sex.

In order for them to be comparable, both women's threads, when combined, contain approximately the same number of words as the men's thread. It may be interesting to point out that it was rather difficult to find a men's thread connected to this topic, or any other topic, because men do not apparently tend to form online groups and socialise on the Internet in the way that women do. Table 1 below displays the basic characteristics of the threads.

Name of thread	Number of entries	Number of words	Dated from – to
<i>30-Somethings</i>	50	10,200	31/7-2/8/2007
<i>Slimming World Support Thread</i>	100	9,500	21/2-1/4/2007
<i>Men's Support Thread</i>	189	19,600	18/1/2009-5/1/2010

Table 1: Basic characteristics of three sub-corpora

In the Introduction, it was shown that to promote in-group solidarity, people more likely employ positive politeness strategies. Therefore, this study addresses three research questions:

1. How do members of the discussion board promote solidarity and build rapport?
2. What positive politeness strategies do they use to avoid FTAs?
3. Are there any differences between male and female users?

The framework for analysing the material was Brown and Levinson's classification of positive politeness strategies. However, it was simplified and adjusted to the purposes of this article. Several categories were combined and renamed, on the grounds of their occurrence in the material under investigation (cf. Brown & Levinson 1978: 70-71). Special attention was paid to rapport-building strategies and hence to claiming common ground, which is one of the

subgroups in Brown and Levinson's classification of politeness strategies. Even though there are instances of other strategies in the material under investigation, such as being optimistic or assuming reciprocity, they were not included in the analysis.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted in the following five main categories falling claiming common ground: noticing/attending to the hearer (reader), in-group markers, seeking agreement, presupposing/asserting common ground (mutuality of goals) and joking/humour.

3 Qualitative results

In this part, the following positive politeness strategies used by contributors in the material will be dealt with one by one: noticing/attending to the hearer, in-group markers, seeking agreement, presupposing/asserting common ground, and joking/humour. Individual strategies will be illustrated in relation to particular examples from the corpora.

3.1 Noticing/attending to the hearer (reader)

This category consists of several positive politeness strategies as defined by Brown and Levinson (1978); what they all have in common is paying attention to the positive face of other group members. At first sight, showing you care about others is one of the primary features of the discussion board under examination. Others are given exaggerated interest, be it a newcomer or a long-time contributor. This includes the following strategies: compliments/praise, welcoming a new member, wishing success and good luck, giving encouragement, showing interest in others, and expressing sympathy.

Complimenting and praising are recurrent strategies in the examined material. As the aim of the participants is to lose weight, they comment on each other's achievements, improved looks, pounds lost, etc. In Example (1), the speaker comments on another participant's new appearance. Example (2) shows another compliment, this time concerning the other person's personality. Example (3) is a welcoming message followed by a compliment to make the newcomer feel more welcome and help her fit in. Finally, Example (4) demonstrates praising another member for having lost several pounds.

- (1) *You are just stunning! What a lucky man DH is (and he's not bad himself).*
- (2) *Rooster Dude- so good to see you back with us. You're the best.*

- (3) *Hi Dolci, good to see you here. Like the signature!*
 (4) *8 pounds a week is a wonderful loss & I do hope you never see a plateau.*

Another frequent exchange consists of contributors' information on how much weight they have lost, which typically elicits praise and compliments on the part of other members. The most frequent reply to this is a plain *well done*. Examples (5) and (6) show such a typical exchange. News like this is welcomed by many members of the board often exaggerating their praise. These exchanges definitely serve as powerful building-rapport devices.

- (5) *Well, first week over and Glbs down*
 (6) *Well done Antari ... 6pounds! you go for it!!!*

The adjacency pair consisting of sharing information on weight loss – compliment/praise is not the only type found in the material; another type will be discussed further on.

Another common representative of attending to others is **welcoming** them, be it somebody who has not posted to the board for a while or a newcomer, such as in Examples (2) and (3) above, respectively. In all the cases in the material that a new person had posted to introduce him or herself or just to say they are there, they were given a welcome by others. It is considered impolite if nobody replies to such a message and an unwelcomed contributor usually never returns to the thread.

The third subcategory in this section is **wishing success and congratulations**. Another type of adjacency pair appears here consisting of announcing a plan to find out their current weight – wishing good luck or consequently congratulating. Examples (7) and (8) show such an exchange of messages: in (7), a member announces to the board that she is going to check whether she has lost any weight the next day with the so-called weigh-in. Obviously, the weigh-in represents a great threat to her face, which is then minimized by others who reply to the initial message by wishing her good luck (cf. (8) below). Typically, (7) serves as an elicitation of good luck wishes.

- (7) *...i get weighed tomorrow night hope its a good result have been good and stuck to the plan*
 (8) *Scottie – good luck with your weigh in.*

Furthermore, the fourth type of positive politeness strategy in this category is **giving encouragement**, which is needed in order to provide support and help others stay with the dieting programme. Two threads in the corpora even have the word *support* in their name; thus people come to these boards to be encouraged and not resign: Examples (9) and (10) illustrate elicitations of encouragement. Very often, encouragement is also given when another participant faces a difficult problem not related to eating and dieting, as is evident from Example (11) below.

- (9) *I put on nearly half a stone on my holiday recently – I comfort ate lots ... So annoyed with myself*
 (10) *I think you did really well to only put on 7 lbs on holiday ... We all are entitled to forget our diets on holiday ... 1 or 2 weeks and then you will be back on track again! Good luck!*
 (11) *Sheila: Stay strong. You have to look out for your kids and yourself. Hanna: Hugs to you. I know it's hard, but you are doing it right.*

Last but not least, participants also **express sympathy** to each other, both concerning their weight loss and difficult real life situations, just as in Example (12).

- (12) *hanna: i am so sorry you are going through this... sorry your van was messed up, at least you get a rental ...*

3.2 In-group markers

By using in-group markers, interlocutors acknowledge their pertinence to a group. For a newcomer, it is relatively hard to understand everything and it is essential for them to master new skills so that they are able to communicate efficiently. Below, there are six examples of the means to promote in-group membership:

Nicknames connected to dieting: Contrary to real life, every message board contributor is represented by a self-chosen nickname. In the message board on dieting, many nicknames are topic-bound (i.e. connected to dieting, such as *SlimmingWorldChick*, *SlimmingWorldQueen*, *veggie*, *cherrycupcake*, *walking2lose*, *wannabsize7*, *run4change*, *Justwant2Bhealthy*).

Jargon, in-group language: Apart from acronyms that can be found in any Internet conversation, such as *BBL* (be back later) or *A/S/L* (request for age, sex and location), there are numerous acronyms connected to dieting as well, for

example, *STGW* (short term goal weight), *SW* (starting weight), *FF* (fat free) and *SBD* (South Beach Diet). These acronyms are used both to save time when typing and to support mutuality in the community, as many of them are known only to group members.

Terminology: This is used especially in the *SlimmingWorld Thread* (e.g. *Laughing Cow Triangles*, *green day*, *syns/sins*, *Healthy Extra*). All of the words mentioned are connected to the special diet called Slimming World, which the participants are on.

Generic names: there are different generic names for men and women (i. e. *gens*, *fellow brothers*, *fellas* vs. (*you*) *ladies*, *SW girls*, *chicks*). According to Brown and Levinson (1978: 113), generic names are used to soften face-threatening acts.

Diminutives and personalized address forms: *mama*, *gurl*, *sunshine*, *babe*, *my dear*, *muffin*. As can be seen from the examples, most of them are gender specific. They are used very frequently to create a friendly atmosphere and again promote the community spirit. All of the diminutives in the corpora were used only by women.

Inclusive we: participants use the personal pronoun *we* to stress they are all in the same situation (Example (10) above, Examples (13) and (14) below).

(13) *I can easily reach the goal – we all can!*

(14) *we all have had weeks now and then...*

3.3 Seeking agreement

Among others, Brown and Levinson (1978: 117) mention the following ways of seeking agreement: raising a safe topic when meeting a stranger, or repeating what the other person has said and agreeing with it. Surprisingly, there are hardly any occurrences of first-encounter small talk in the examined material, perhaps because the participants do have a common topic even though they have never met before. This topic offers them common ground and something to talk about, so they do not need to raise general topics such as the weather.

As for repetition, message board technology enables its users to 'repeat' what was said by another person by the so-called quoting, which means cutting a part of the previous message or the entire message, pasting it into the newly-formed message and subsequently responding to it. This intertextuality device is used frequently in all kinds of message boards.

However, the most frequent type of seeking agreement found in the corpora is not mentioned by Brown and Levinson at all. It can be referred to as *unsolicited*

agreement and is illustrated in Examples (15) and (16). Both of them are posted as a reply to a previous message in which the speaker complains about her lack of discipline at the weekends. Both examples show that other users felt it necessary to share the original opinion and stress that they have the same problem. Once again, it helps to promote a spirit of solidarity and softens the FTA, in this case represented by the initial speaker's self-deprecation.

(15) *scottie-Hope your weigh in goes well. The weekend always gets me too, I'm so good all week then just crash.*

(16) *I must say, the weekends get to me too. I was determined but then I went shopping when I was starving on Saturday night and bought a tub of Haagan Dazs – oops*

3.4 Presupposing/asserting common ground

Asserting common ground is another effective strategy appearing in the corpora. In the *Slimming World Thread*, the interlocutors stress their pertinence to a community based on a dieting programme that they all follow. In *30Somethings*, the community is built on even more solid ground, as its members have been meeting for a longer time and know each other quite well. *Men's Support Thread* demonstrates how proud and happy the male participants are to have an all-male group, as is clear from Example (19). In Examples (17) and (18), the interlocutors stress the importance of having one's own thread, which serves as common ground for their contributions. The latter is an answer to a newcomer's request for permission to join the board. The speaker grants permission by welcoming the newcomer and accompanies it with praising their community.

(17) *I'm pleased that we now have our own thread as it's good to get some different ideas.*

(18) *WELCOME KATRINA this is a great place to be*

(19) *Good to see some more men joining in :) Now that there's a testosterone thread – count me in!*

3.5 Joking and humour

CMC language is regarded as very playful and making frequent use of humour. According to Norrick (1994: 409), one of the reasons for the frequent occurrence of playful and witty remarks is that humour goes hand-in-hand with involvement. He goes on to claim that "if the attempt at humour is understood

and accepted, participants in the conversation may enjoy enhanced rapport". However, when the hearer does not enjoy the joke, it can, on the contrary, result in loss of rapport. Likewise, Coates (2007: 29) agrees that "shared laughter nurtures group solidarity". Furthermore, playful conversation needs cooperation of all participants, as conversational humour is a mutual and joint activity, especially humour used by women (Crawford 2003, Holmes 2006, Coates 2007). When talking about the role of humour as a rapport-enhancer, emphasis is placed especially on spontaneity. Contributors like to improvise and play with features that are characteristic of CMC language, such as creative spelling or emoticons/smiley's.

The following examples serve to demonstrate how humorous the language of asynchronous conversation can be as well as the rapport-building function of humour. Example (20) presents a self-deprecating remark by a member of the men's thread: by making fun of himself, he minimizes the threat to his positive face caused by being overweight and riding a small bike. Others assure him immediately that he does not look awkward at all.

In Example (21), one of the participants, *Mo*, the board's entertainer, tries to attract other members' attention by giving a 'chain order': she asks others to do ten squats or any other form of physical exercise. Basically, it is a funny request for cooperation. She uses persuasive devices (red and purple print in the original, capital letters, underlining, imperatives, setting her own example). She also adds a hedge (*I know, it's sounds silly...*) in order not to sound too strict or impolite. In fact, it is only a playful attempt to attract more posts. This message is successful as it elicits six replies (Examples (22)-(25) below). Soon she is joined by other contributors, one of them being a newcomer (Example (23) below). Interestingly, the newcomer states the group's sense of humour as the reason for her wanting to join the community. When she is welcomed to the board in Example (24), the contributor puts emphasis on humour by stressing that she is about to join their *fun little group*. She goes on to praise *Mo* for her initiative (even though she introduces her compliment with a hedge, *I kind of*, perhaps because she is aware it is only meant as a joke). She finishes her contribution with a funny remark, mentioning how people around her would have reacted if they had seen her exercise. The speaker in Example (22) is joking as well, which is emphasised at the end by inserting the acronym *LOL*, meaning *laughing out loud*. All of the contributions to *Mo*'s challenge are humorous as well.

- (20) *My only fear is that I look like an apple on a stick from behind to passers by! big round guy on a small bike :D*

- (21) *This is a team effort! 10 rep chain letter type thang. I'll start. I'm going to get up right here right now and do 10 squats. Ok, done-I did deep squats, weight free, holding for a count of 5 on each one! WHO'S NEXT AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING? I know, it's sounds silly... but just try it this once everyone, please... COME ON EVERYBODY! GO GO GO! MO*
 (22) *MO i got up and did 10 jumping jacks at work everyone thought i was crazy LOL*
 (23) *You look like a pretty fun group, so I thought I'd say "hello". I'll join in with 10 calf raises!*
 (24) *Welcome to our fun little group Karrina! Mo I did 10 squats at my computer. I kind of like the 10 rep chain letter. Did it when the kids and hubby were not in the room. Then might think I went off the deep end for sure.*
 (25) *Mo- Seriously you should become a motivational speaker, I did 10 squats.*

4 Quantitative results

Table 2 below presents the number of occurrences of the individual positive politeness strategies employed by women and men. Both groups were approximately of the same size and thus the results are comparable. Undoubtedly, the size of the material is rather limited. This was caused by the fact that it was impossible to find a larger and more frequented all-male discussion, and not only concerning the topic of dieting. As far as I know, men do not tend to form communities where they would discuss their problems in the way that women do. As the primary aim was to analyse how politeness strategies help to enhance the mutuality of an online community, an Internet forum where men discuss topics such as body-building or makes of cars offered no such material. Therefore, the size of the material under investigation is not as large as would be necessary to reach more persuasive conclusions and more representative findings.

When men and women are compared, their most frequently applied strategies differ. The analysis revealed that women most frequently wished good luck and congratulated each other on their achievement and success. Further on, their second most frequently employed strategies were compliments and praising, and the third, seeking agreement.

Strategies	Women's Threads		Men's Thread
	Combined		
Noticing/attending to hearer	Compliments/praise	33	22
	Welcoming a new member	13	10
	Wishing success and congratulations	50	12
	Giving encouragement	20	16
Seeking agreement	Expressing interest in others	17	6
	Expressing sympathy	17	1
	Presupposing/asserting common ground	29	18
Joking		14	21
		27	47
Total		220	153

Table 2: Positive politeness strategies in women's and men's threads

Contrary to that, the men's most frequently adopted strategy was joking and it was so in one-third of all strategies applied. The second most frequently used strategy was the same as in the women's threads (i.e. compliments and praising), even though there were much fewer occurrences. Their third most frequently adopted strategy was presupposing/stressing common ground. As opposed to the women, the men hardly ever expressed sympathy or showed interest in other members. The differences between both genders are illustrated in Figure 1.

Finally, when the total numbers of positive politeness strategies are compared, women (220 strategies) used many more of them, nearly 1.5 times as many as men (153 strategies). This proves what was said in Section 1.3 above, that women prefer to attend to each other's positive face more than men.

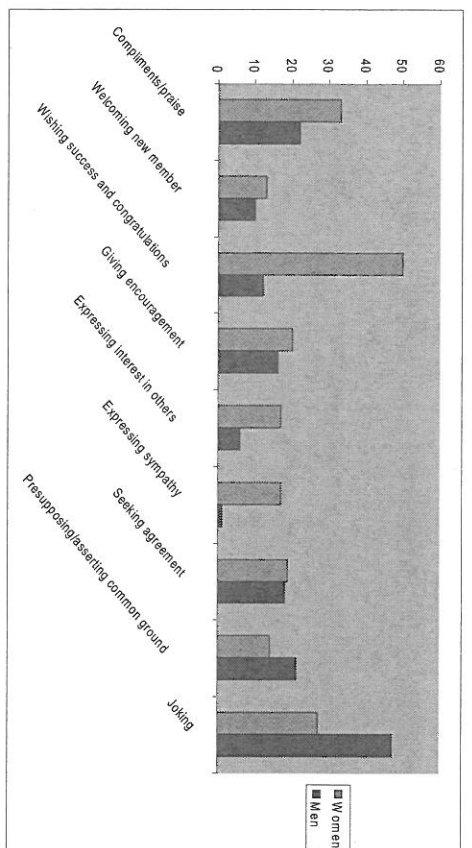


Figure 1: Positive politeness strategies used by women in comparison with men

5 Conclusion

This paper is a contribution to researching mutual cooperation in an online community formed in an asynchronous Internet discussion depending on the user's gender. A powerful device to support in-group mutuality and cooperativeness is attending to the recipient's positive face via trying to claim a common ground. Therefore, a socio-pragmatic analysis of this group of positive politeness strategies was conducted to find out which of them are used most frequently and whether there is any difference between female and male users.

As the research sample was of limited size, only certain tendencies were discovered that must be confirmed in further research. However, the analysis showed that women and men do employ different linguistic means to minimize FTAs, in this case represented by the sensitive topic of weight. Women most frequently encouraged and congratulated each other on their achievements, whereas men preferred joking and humour. To a similar degree, both sexes paid a great deal of attention to the positive face of other community members by means of compliments and praise. On the whole, women used many more positive politeness strategies than men, which is in accordance with contemporary literature on politeness and gender (Holmes 1993, Tannen 1994, Androustopoulos 2006, Herring & Paolillo 2006).

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