

Politeness at Work: Analysis of a Job Application Letter with Leech's Principles of Politeness

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The job application letter is a sub-genre of business letter. It is a formal letter and is aimed to promote the applicant for a specific job application. This paper describes and analyses the discursive elements of a sample letter by using the principles of politeness proposed by Leech (1983, 2005). The findings display the interplay of Modesty and Approbation Maxims, while the Tact Maxim also plays a part in the interpretation of the letter.

Keywords: cooperate principle, politeness principles, job application letter

INTRODUCTION

The job application letter is considered a sub-genre or repertoire of business letter. It is regarded as a work of promotional literature (Bhatia, 1993). This type of letter is written by job applicants in an attempt to promote themselves in a most persuasive manner. This is because the candidates hope to secure an interview and subsequently be chosen for the job that they are applying for. Accordingly, the letter should contain the most impressive information about the applicants in order to attract the potential employer and establish the right impression from the beginning.

THEORETICAL PRELIMINARIES

There are certain conventions for writing a business letter in order for it to be accepted by the business community. Thus, genre analysis is an analytical tool for examining the letter. As aforementioned, the job application letter is a sub-genre of business letter, and it shows a clear intention to perform a specific social action, namely, to promote the candidate's own self, which serves to the definition of genre as follows:

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the

schematic structure of the discourse and both influences and constrains choice of content and style. (Swales, 1990, p.58)

Business letter structure

Business letters have a schematic structure of a letter subject followed by an opening salutation, a pre-propositional, propositional, and post-propositional section, and a closing salutation. However, its sub-genre, the job application letter, has the clear purpose of promoting the applicants themselves, and has a more specific schematic form, as follows:

- Applicant's name and address
- Date
- Person and address the applicant is writing to (should include the recipient's name and title, if known)
- Salutation (such as Dear Mr./Ms.)
- Concise information about the applicant
- Marketing the applicant's own self (such as relevant job skills/experience, benefits to bring to the job or company)
- Other documents/information that may be included (resume; how, when and where the applicant can be contacted for an interview)
- Closure (Yours sincerely, Yours faithfully)

Principles of politeness

A number of analytical tools have been used to analyse this type of correspondence. For example, Bhatia (1993, p.59) proposes a seven-move structure to analyse each element of a job application letter. In this paper, Leech (2005)'s principles of politeness were applied. Leech wrote *Principles of Pragmatics* in 1983, which is regarded as one of the pioneering works in the field of pragmatics and politeness. He based his work upon Grice (1975)'s concept of the cooperative principle (CP), which explains how the hearers understand the messages being conveyed, from the surface level of meaning to the subtle level suggested by implicature(s), intentionally produced by the speaker. The CP consists of four key maxims: (1) Maxim of quantity (refers to clarity of the information); (2) Maxim of quality (referred to as Truth); (3) Maxim of relation (Relevance); and (4) Maxim of manner (Brevity).

According to Leech (1983), the politeness principle (PP) serves as a necessary complement to the CP and helps explain the point which is left unexplained by the CP, especially why people are indirect about what they intend to say (Leech, 1983:80). The PP consists of the following maxims (Leech, *ibid*, p.132):

Maxims	Goals
Tact maxim	(a) Minimize cost to other

(in impositives and commissives)	(b) Maximize benefit to other
Generosity maxim (in impositives and commissives)	(a) Minimize benefit to self (b) Maximize cost to self
Approbation maxim (in expressives and assertives)	(a) Minimize dispraise of other (b) Maximize praise of other
Modesty maxim (in expressives and assertives)	(a) Minimize praise of self (b) Maximize dispraise of self
Agreement maxim (in assertives)	(a) Minimize disagreement between self and other (b) Maximize agreement between self and other
Sympathy maxim (in assertives)	(a) Minimize antipathy between self and other (b) Maximize sympathy between self and others

In response to criticism of his work, especially on the point that Leech established too many maxims, such that (1) one can generate an infinite number of them; and (2) the pragmatic theory will be too broad to allow counter examples (B&L, 1987, p.4, cited in Leech, 2005, p.6), Leech (2005), as a result, proposed 25 years later a *Restatement of the Treatment of Politeness in Principles of Pragmatics (POP)*. This is a revised version of Leech's original work of *Principles of Pragmatics*, in which Leech reshapes some of his concepts and proposals.

According to Leech (2005, p.6),

The Principle of Politeness (PP) – analogous to Grice's CP – is a constraint observed in human communicative behavior, influencing us to avoid communicative discord or offence, and maintain communicative concord.

Leech refers to 'communicative discord' as a situation in which two people communicate in order to '*entertain mutually incompatible goals*' (2005, p.6). He also notes that politeness is an aspect of goal-oriented behavior. This means that S (refers to Speaker or Addresser) is being polite in choosing to use a particular expression because S's goal is to endorse the PP, and S would like to communicate this goal to H (refers to Hearer or Addressee).

In relation to goals, Leech mentions that people not only have some illocutionary goals or primary goals to attain in linguistic communication, they also have social goals in that they would like to maintain good communicative relations with other people (2005. p.7). Leech (1983, p.133) divides politeness into kinds which are negative politeness which means avoidance of discord, and positive politeness or seeking discord. However, in his later version (2005, p.7), he terms these two kinds as neg-politeness involving requests and pos-politeness involving compliments.

Leech (2005) additionally proposes that there are two kinds of politeness scale: (1) Absolute politeness scale, and (2) Relative politeness scale. The first one concerns degrees of politeness, e.g. *Can you help me?* is obviously more polite, as a request, than *Help me* as it offers choice to *H* (Leech, *ibid*:7). Absolute politeness is unidirectional and can vary by degree in terms of lexicogrammatical form and semantic interpretation of the expression. Relative politeness relates to norms in a given society, for a given group, or for a given situation. This kind is bi-directional and is rather sensitive to the context it occurs within. For example, *Could I possibly interrupt?* might be too polite if used with family members. There are three scales of relative politeness: *overpoliteness*, *underpoliteness*, and *politeness appropriate to the situation* (Leech, *ibid*).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data selection criteria

The sample of job application letter which was chosen as the data for this analysis was written by Kiana Johnson, who was applying for the Assistant Safety Supervisor position at CUNA Mutual Insurance. Linguistically, it is regarded as an effective sample of a job application letter for a number of reasons, especially for the parts in which the writer/speaker is clear about her capability and is able to express it strongly. The following lines prove the above statements:

I feel my educational training and professional background **make me well suited** for the demands of this position.

I believe the rest of this letter will illustrate **what a great addition I would be to your workforce**.

As you'll note on my resume, along with **a full complement** of safety courses, **my familiarity with** government safety regulations has been developed through an internship at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

It is this type of **innovative thinking, hard work**, and **dedication** which I would bring to your department as an Assistant Safety Supervisor...

The office director was so pleased with my work that I **was given the 2005 Student Worker Award**.

FINDINGS

Along the line of politeness principles, the **Modesty Maxim/Constraint**¹ seems most relevant to the above sample lines from the job application letter. This maxim concerns self evaluation. It is considered polite if a person tries to (a) minimize praise of self and (b) maximize dispraise of self. On the surface, it looks like the lines from the job application letter do not observe the Modesty Maxim at all, as the speaker not only fails to minimize praise of herself, she even maximizes the praise, seemingly to the fullest possible extent. Some bold expressions above prove the point e.g. *make me well suited; what a great addition I would be to your workforce; a full complement of safety courses, my familiarity with government safety regulations; this type of innovative thinking, hard work, and dedication which I would bring to your department; I was given the 2005 Student Worker Award.*

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the speaker has not observed the PP. Leech notes in his *Principles of Pragmatics* (1983) that his proposed maxims should be observed only 'up to a certain point, rather than as absolute rules' (Leech, *ibid*, p.133). Leech illustrates more on this point in his *2005 Restatement* version about the two kinds of politeness scale, which are absolute and relative politeness scales. The phenomenon of maximizing the praise of oneself in this job application letter can be registered as 'a relative politeness appropriate to the situation.'

The situation in this context refers to the chance to secure an interview for the prospective job and the first point of contact between potential employer and employee. The applicant has only one chance to promote herself by disclosing the good qualities she possesses (not yet the chance to prove it) in order to interest her potential employer. As a result, she cannot afford to be too modest. Leech (1983, p.133) reiterates at this point that,

A person who continually seeks opportunities for self-denigration quickly becomes tedious, and more importantly, will be judged insincere. In this way this way the CP (Maxim of Quality) restrains us from being too modest,....

Leech mentions above the connection with Maxim of Quality in a way that it holds back modesty. The speaker can always declare as much as possible the capabilities she thinks are true of her. In this way the truth about herself restricts her from being too modest. Of course, at the first point of dealing

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In his *Restatement of the Treatment of Politeness in Principles of Pragmatics* (2005), Leech labels the term 'maxims' as 'constraints. He defines these constraints as variant manifestations of the same super-constraint, the Grand Strategy of Politeness (or GSP) (Leech, 2005, p.12).

between the prospective employers and employees, the mentioned truth cannot yet be proven.

Another key element in the job application letter is the praise of other which refers to the hearer or the potential employer in this case. The following lines from the letter are the examples of praising others:

...I am especially interested in your company because I see that **you are the leading insurance company in the Midwest region** and also **earned a Worker Safety Zone award from the Wisconsin Safety Commission...**

...I'd love to contribute to **a company as interested in worker safety as yours seems to be...**

According to the Principles of Politeness, the above lines fit into the Approbation Maxim. This maxim concerns paying compliments to others. It is considered polite if a person tries to (a) minimize dispraise of others, and (b) maximize praise of others. Leech (1983, p.135) explains this maxim as simply as *"avoid saying unpleasant things about others, and more particularly, about h"*. The above text from the job application letter observes the Maxim of Approbation in every aspect. However, there is also a limit on paying compliments as too much of them, or excessive flattery will be considered insincere.

Up to this point, it is interesting to note the relationship between Modesty Maxim and Approbation Maxim. It is obviously shown that when praising her own self, the speaker cannot avoid praising the workplace that she is applying to. Conversely, when praising the company, she returns to praise herself as illustrated below:

Praising S→	"I feel my educational training and professional background make me well suited for the demands of this position." (Paragraph 1)
Praising H→	"...I am especially interested in your company because I see that you are the leading insurance company in the Midwest region and also earned a Worker Safety Zone award from the Wisconsin Safety Commission. I'd love to contribute to a company as interested in worker safety as yours seems to be." (paragraph 1)
Praising S→	"I believe the rest of this letter will illustrate what a great addition I would be to your workforce." (paragraph 1)

The turn taking of S and H praising occurs in the same paragraph (1) of the letter. In normal circumstances, asymmetries of politeness can take place when two opposing strategies are being applied together. For example, it is considered polite to convey a highly favourable evaluation of *H* whereas doing the same of *S* is impolite. Conversely, it is impolite to dispraise *H*, but polite with *S* doing the same action (Leech, 2005, p.8). However, the circumstances above

where the speaker praises herself, then the *H*, then herself again, displays the interplay between Modesty Maxim and Approbation Maxim in the job application letter. The application of both maxims at the same time by *S* can be interpreted as (1) *S* would like to give the company the impression that she has studied them, and thus is keen to work with them; and (2) more importantly, *S* would like to make the implication that a good company needs a good worker like herself. All of these intentions can be related back to the main purpose of the job application letter, which is to promote the candidate herself in hope to secure an interview with a potential employer which subsequently may lead to employment.

Not only are the two abovementioned maxims involved in the job application letter; the Tact Maxim also plays a part. In the *Restatement of the Grand Strategy of Politeness* (Leech, 2005, p.12), Leech puts the Tact Maxim in the constraint of *placing a low value on S's wants*, which refers to making requests. Let's consider the following final lines from the job application letter:

I look forward to discussing my qualifications with you. In fact I will be **making a trip to Madison** within the next month which **might present an ideal opportunity for an interview**. In the meantime, if there is any other information I can provide you, please contact me at (412) 555-1234. If I don't hear from you within the next two weeks, I **will make a follow up call** to see how your candidate search is progressing.

The bold expressions above are evidences of *S*'s wants. Basically, she wants to be selected for an interview. However, *S* cannot announce her wants so openly or make a request so directly as she would like be polite and mitigate the imposition on *H*, and thus opts for being indirect and observing the Tact Maxim. According to Leech (2005, p.13), "requests are often indirect, tentative, giving an opportunity to refuse, and also minimizing *S*'s imposition on *H*."

From the discussions in regards of the three maxims above, there is one common point that should be addressed. This is in regards of illocutionary goals and social goals. As Leech has mentioned (2005, p.7), people observe certain maxims because they have goals in mind. For the Modesty Maxim discussed above, the speaker in the job application letter clearly shows her illocutionary goal she wants to achieve in her linguistic communication, which is to persuade the employers to consider her for an interview, which might ultimately lead to a job offer. However, this primary goal needs support from her social goals i.e. she needs to show good communicative relations with others by not overpraising herself or being too modest.

In relation to the Approbation Maxim, the speaker pays compliments (i.e. using pos-politeness) to the hearers as she would like to communicate her illocutionary goals i.e. her high evaluation of the company. In this context, the illocutionary goals support the social goals as the speaker would like to be polite

and maintain good relations with the company. In regards of the Tact Maxim, when the speaker makes an indirect request for an interview, her illocutionary goal and social compete each other. The speaker observes the Tact Maxim as she needs to avoid offence by applying *neg-politeness* (which involves indirectness) i.e. to mitigate the degree to which the speaker's goals are imposed on the company or hearers (Leech, 2005, p.7).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated how the principles of politeness help to analyse the discursive elements of a job application letter. A sample of a job application letter was selected and analysed in detail. It was first categorized as a sub-genre of business letter with social purposes. The genre analysis led to the main message of the letter that is, to promote the speaker for her job application. The PP helped to identify the interplay between the Modesty Maxim and the Approbation Maxim, which manifested the asymmetries of politeness. The discursive elements in the letter prove the endorsement of the PP. Based on the analysis, the letter demonstrated a clear persuasive manner, which served its purpose as a promotional text for the job applicant in hope to secure an interview with a prospective employer and possible employment in the future.

THE AUTHOR

Sirintorn Duangkhot received her MA in English from Chulalongkorn University in 2012. She is now an independent scholar and is focusing her research in Corpus Linguistics. sirintorn.d@gmail.com

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APPENDIX

50 North 2nd St.
Indiana, PA 15701
email: wiba@iup.edu

Ororo Munroe, Safety Director
CUNA Mutual Insurance
225 N. Mills St. Madison, WI 53076
November 29th, 2006

Dear Safety Director Munroe,

I am writing this letter to apply for your program's Assistant Safety Supervisor position. I feel my educational training and professional background make me well suited for the demands of this position. Currently I am senior finishing a Safety Science degree at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) and could begin work on June 1st as your ad specifies. I also work part time in IUP's Office of International Affairs. I am especially interested in your company because I see that you are the leading insurance company in the midwest region and also earned a Worker Safety Zone award from the Wisconsin Safety Commission. I'd love to contribute to a company as interested in worker safety as yours seems to be. I believe the rest of this letter will illustrate what a great addition I would be to your work force.

In looking over the job description, I see that your chief need is for someone with a strong working knowledge of OSHA regulations. As you'll note on my resume, along with a full complement of safety courses, my familiarity with government safety regulations has been developed through an internship at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. I worked with the plant safety inspector who supervised operator safety for a paper which had a daily press run of 500,000 copies. During the internship, my most important training came when the paper purchased two new printing presses. I was given the responsibility of reviewing all instructional materials that came with the presses, and designing a simplified operator's guide sheet to be posted at each press. This guide sheet had to meet all OSHA standards and be easily accessible by 30 press operators of varying skill levels. The plant inspector not only approved my design, but then placed me in charge of updating all the older press safety signs in the building. It is this type of innovative thinking, hard work, and dedication which I would bring to your department as an Assistant Safety Supervisor.

Your ad also mentions a need for a worker with strong organizational skills. As you'll note on my resume, I have been an Office Assistant for two years in the Office of International Affairs. In that position, I performed variety of tasks including filing applications from international students. I modified the office's filing system and added a computer record keeping component that helped speed up application processing time. The office director was so pleased with my work that I was given the 2005 Student Worker Award.

I look forward to discussing my qualifications with you. In fact I will be making a trip to Madison within the next month which might present an ideal opportunity for an

interview. In the meantime, if there is any other information I can provide you, please contact me at (412) 555-1234. If I don't hear from you within the next two weeks, I'll make a follow up call to see how your candidate search is progressing.

Thank you for taking the time to review my application.

Sincerely,

Kiana Johnson

Kiana Johnson