Investigating impoliteness in workplace emails by Chinese users of English

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Abstract: This paper presents a number of findings concerning impoliteness within the workplace email of Chinese users of English. Particular interest was given to the exploration of the relationship between specific speech acts and the occurrence of impoliteness and non-politeness; what impolite devices were used in frontline business communication; what are the circumstances, patterns and functions of impoliteness in workplace email? Findings illustrate that message enforcers were the most common impoliteness device used, generally being utilized to make a demand, emphasize a position and place blame. In terms of giving rise to potential impoliteness the assertive speech act was the most hazardous. In order to maintain authenticity the examples used are reproduced exactly as they occurred in the data set, in places substantial deviations from the conventions of English grammar and spelling are to be found. Pedagogical implications are discussed in the conclusion.

Keywords: Workplace email, email acts, impoliteness devices, non-politeness, face.

1. Introduction

Email is ubiquitous within the modern workplace; product introductions, order confirmations, shipping receipts, account alerts, short reports, long reports, announcements and corporate bulletins are just a few of the genres subsumed by the medium. One cannot underestimate the revolutionary impact the medium has had upon business operations and employees alike (Hewitt 2006). In an era where the 'competition is just a click way', employees of all rank and order are charged with the task of maintaining frequent communication with business partners, often originating from significantly different cultural and linguistic backgrounds whilst having to use English as a business lingua franca. In the fast paced, highly connected global economy, emailers are expected to execute a multitude of tasks far beyond the simple transmission of information. This has to be done through a medium that does not allow for the conveyance of emotional cues, nor interjection on behalf of a locutor, and at best is highly ambiguous – existing between both written and spoken language in terms of style (Baron 2000). It has been noted that ESL/EFL business professionals can be unintentionally impolite during high-stakes moments, especially during arguments or when presenting negative information; this is most probably a function of ignorance, i.e. they are innocent of the linguistic implications of impoliteness in written communication (Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2011). For non-native speakers of English, the risks of being misinterpreted or construed as being impolite have profound implications for working relationships and Brand perceptions. For this reason this paper aims to investigate the research gap of C2C (company-to-company) email (im)politeness amongst non-native speakers of English; in this case Chinese users of English.

As a topic of investigation, email has found its way onto the scholarly agendas of several streams of knowledge - many not principally concerned with language matters (e.g. management studies, media studies and social psychology). Studies from such fields have focused on many of the problematic effects of email, such as excessive volume (Dawley & Anthony 2003), information overload (O'Kane et al. 2007), work interruption (Jackson et al. 2003) and avoidant decisional styles (Phillips & Reddie 2007). Again, whilst these studies are not primarily concerned with language matters, they have been useful in aiding further understanding of the contextual factors that contribute to workplace (im)politeness. From a purely linguistic perspective, an arguably more relevant body of literature has been built up in relation to the use of the medium in the commercial sphere including analysis of textual features (Gains 1999), register (Gimenez 2006), intercultural communication (Murphy & Levy 2006), pragmatics (Ho 2011), discourse analysis (Kong 2006),

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readability (Sallis & Kassabova 2000) and style (Author 2000; Waldvogel 2007). On the whole both politeness and impoliteness in regards to email remain an under-researched avenue of investigation.

The study of email is important to ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in that the dominant role of English as a lingua franca in global business is realized mainly by email. Multiple studies have confirmed the integral part of English in communication within multinational and even national companies, for instance, Hewitt (2006), Gimenez (2006) and Evans (2010, 2012). Ehrenreich (2010) describes English in business as an "international contact language" realizing the dialogue between non-native and native interactants from varied lingualcultural backgrounds with all levels of language capabilities. Therefore, the English-proficiency of employees is considerably vital to ensure a successful communication with their business partners. Although English-mediated email has played a crucial role in the workplace, "the ESP literature itself is not especially overflowing with studies of email communication in business settings" (Evans 2012: 203). Email etiquette has been discussed even less. As a result, training materials for Business English scarcely cover email impoliteness, leaving an obvious gap between classroom and workplace.

1.1. *Linguistic impoliteness in the workplace*
In order to build harmonious relations and maintain face, business communication is often idealized by a high degree of politeness and an active avoidance of impoliteness (Holmes, 2005), nevertheless in certain types of business communicative acts such as making requests, giving commands and checking comprehension, impoliteness may be given the opportunity to occur quite easily (Chakorn 2006; Murphy & Levy 2006). Some claim that impoliteness being directly linked with the notion of the face threatening act (FTA) is actually commonly found in the workplace (Schnurret al. 2008). A few studies have looked at verbal interactions amongst co-workers, Schnurr et al. (2008) examined verbal interactions among employees and stressed the role of power in relation to impoliteness; the majority of offensive acts observed were inflicted by superiors on subordinates. However, research in this area is even more limited than in the area of politeness due to the fact that authentic verbal or written evidence of impoliteness within an institutional context is scarce. Culpeper's research (1996, 2008, 2011) on impoliteness is widely quoted, but his interest is more on private or in-group contexts applying mostly to family and friendship circles. Politeness in different written contexts in business is generally overlooked.

1.2 *Impoliteness in email*
Some researchers portray email as a "depersonalized and businesslike" medium capable only of information transmission rather than interpersonal relationship formation and maintenance; politeness markers or indicators being reduced or omitted (Liu 2002). Others however assert that politeness strategies within the medium are highly important and function so as to build social solidarity amongst emailers (Kong 2006; Murphy & Levy 2006). Indeed email function has been shown to affect the use of politeness strategies; Murphy & Levy (2006) found that politeness strategies used varied between low- and high-imposing requests. Kankaanranta (2006) claims the choice of politeness strategy is influenced by factors such as social distance, power, rankings of individuals in specific cultures as well as other cross-cultural norms and values. Further aggravating factors include the speed of communication and the high degree of informality as in spoken discourse; "discourtesy flows from the need for haste and brevity" (Evans 2012: 208).

As already well enunciated in this paper, (im)politeness is directly linked with face threatening acts (FTA) however it should be noted that at the time of research, face threatening acts in written workplace communication, are under-researched. Several studies have exposed verbal threats in internal emails from senior staff to junior members of staff (Limberg 2009; Angouri & Tseliga 2010); perhaps suggesting that impoliteness is more commonplace than common perception has it.

It has been noted that apart from textual context and style, emails in the workplace also seem to be affected by non-linguistic behavior, for example, information overload (O'Kane et al. 2007) and work interruption (Jackson et al. 2003). Other email acts such as postponement, use of punctuation marks, intentional exclusion, use of capitalization, cc-ing copy to other parties, no subject line, no salutation and closing could also have impolite effects (Li & MacGregor 2010). These are however beyond the scope of this paper.

Care has to be taken when extrapolating findings from many of the studies on (im)politeness as many were conducted amongst academic staff and students; power relations amongst corporate employees differ remarkably from those found in the average faculty. Furthermore whilst very few studies have applied the theory of politeness to the study of inter-corporate emails, even fewer have solely concentrated on impoliteness. Little is known about how politeness strategies and impolite devices are used in dealing with high-stake activities, such as making strong requests and conveying negative messages, in facilitating business transactions and in building business relations.

1.3. *English as a business lingua franca*

The fact that English has become the language of international business communication (Crystal 2006) is confirmed by multiple studies (Seidlhofer et al 2006; Flowerdew & Wan 2006; Kong 2006; Evans 2010, 2012). As much of business now operates in a global market, many business communications take place in neither party's first language, and English is often the language of choice. Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2006) claim business English is the most common type of language used in the commercial sphere, not only by people from different nations but also amongst people within the same nation. Moreover, non-native English-speaking professionals now greatly outnumber native speakers (Crystal 2003). For international companies, the language competency of their non-native-speaking employees is of considerable importance to ensure successful communication with their business partners.

Business communication between non-native speakers of English is relevant to applied linguists interested in how language works in real-world contexts, rather than in the classroom. Of the studies related to workplace writing, some attempt to investigate authentic records of business communication (Flowerdew & Wan 2006; Kirkpatrick 1991; Kong 2006). Kong's business discourse study analyzed 250 internal directive emails according to their semantic accounts: reason, condition, purpose, result, attribution, concession and manner, and illustrated indirectness in business interactions. In three types of relationship: peer to peer, subordinate to superior and superior to subordinate, the politeness behaviours are found to be related to the Chinese ideology of hierarchy which stipulates absolute respect for power and authority. The differences among the groups are attributable to politeness and mitigation of potential face-threat (Kong 2006: 96-98). Chakorn (2006) focused on the use of hedging in business letters for building "harmony" in commercial activities amongst corporations in Asia. Diverse politeness strategies have also been observed in Northern Europe, where Finish and Swedish workers used frank and direct tones when making requests by email (Kankaanranta 2006). Although these studies give some indication of the importance and frequency of English use, the findings offer few clues as to the audience, purpose, length, status and – most importantly – the complexities of (im)politeness, professionals are required to deal in written communication.

The issue of confidentiality makes it difficult to source authentic business communication texts (Flowerdew & Wan 2006; Li 2001). This reason, in part, explains the predominant focus of business writing research on writing produced specifically for public purposes, for example CEOs' letters or Chairmen's statements (Hyland 1998), financial reports (Bhatia 2010), promotional materials (Cheng & Mok 2006; Connor & Gladkov 2004). Email research tends to rely on internal communication (Li 2000; Limberg 2009), or personal contact (Gains 1999; Crystal, 2006; Locher 2011), or between teachers and students (Ho 2011; Kogetsidis 2011). These studies described

different communicative features and functions of workplace emails and personal emails, mostly on building up relationship and managing rapport, but they only partially depicted workplace writing needs; they particularly lack linguistic evidence of how negative situations are dealt with in inter-company business transactions.

The research questions of this study are:

1. What are the impoliteness devices used in frontline business email exchange by Chinese users of English?
2. What are the circumstances and patterns of impoliteness in workplace emails?
3. What are the functions of impoliteness in the workplace emails?
4. What is the cultural impact on the perceptions of impoliteness in the Chinese workplace?

2. Research methods

2.1. Data

Authentic, naturally occurring emails proved invaluable for the investigation of impoliteness within the exchanges of Chinese users of English in workplace email. Indeed few studies to date have examined such Company to Company (C2C) email exchanges. The data used in this study are 373 emails, spanning a time period of 2008-2012, contributed by a company operating in the textile production industry in Hong Kong with offices in the mainland China. The main email protagonists were quality controllers and sales persons responsible for the overall day-to-day production process, from the initial cutting to the final shipment of the finished products. 90% of them had university degrees in different disciplines. All emails involve external communication between individuals from different companies and factories. To ensure confidentiality, sensitive data in the emails, such as names and addresses of business partners, were replaced by pseudonyms. Confidential information about products and prices were also removed for final presentation. An email study can be done better with a corpus approach because frequencies of patterns could reveal the norms of a particular genre and thus reflect the community of practice (Wenger 1998).

2.2. Analytical framework

The study of email, because of its unique nature as a medium, suggests itself to a wide range of analytic approaches available to linguists and other social scientists. The analysis first follows the classification of email speech acts by Goldstein and Sabin (2006) to identify communicative functions of each email message, and then takes on Culpeper's model of investigating conventional and implicational impoliteness in different contexts. The last stage of the analysis is to match email acts with impolite devices.

Goldstein and Sabin (2006), heavily borrowing from the well established Speech Acts theory (Austin 1962; Bach & Harnish 1979; Seale 1986), developed the concept of 'email speech acts'. Excluding those that involve acts towards the self or the non-personal emails such as reminders such as company newsletters, reminders and announcements, Speech Email Acts or SEA, identified by Goldstein and Sabin can be divided into five main categories: Assertives; Behabitives; Commits; Directives and Transmissives. Goldstein and Sabin's categories were utilised when annotating the emails in the corpus as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Email Act annotation guidelines

Email Act		Data example
Assertive	Make statements/state opinions/express belief. Suggesting, boasting, concluding.	*1,375M WILL COST A LOT ON PRODUCTION, SHIPPING, DOCS...ETC.* *THE BEST PRICE I CAN 2.45/M.*
Behabitive	Expression of feelings/mental attitude towards a certain set of events. Apologizing, welcoming, thanking.	*Sorry I forget to advise you fabric mill need to e-mail us the PI for record, when receive you need to check all the details.*
Commit	Promise action/offer to do something. Vowing, agreeing, planning.	*I will send you the prices of S091 by tomorrow …*
Directive	Request for action/command. Asking, commanding, inviting.	*Please confirm receipt & comments by return.*
Transmissive	Simple transmission of information.	*Pls see attachment for updated fabric mill stock level*

In terms of delineating between the categories, the guidelines above proved fairly useful for the annotators. There was an initial difference of inter-annotator agreement between the last two categories in the table above which had to be addressed after the pilot test of the guidelines. On a literal interpretation the conventional construction used for most simple Transmissive acts (e.g. *Please see attached/Please refer to attached documents*) can easily lend itself to an interpretation that would place it within the Directive category; it is after all commanding the reader to do something. In clarifying the boundaries of the two categories it was decided that the Transmissive category comprised the simple transmission of information; no act was required above and beyond the absorption of the information being transmitted. The Directive category was deemed to comprise those requests whereby the initiator attempts to get the receiver to do something; something beyond simply reading information in or attached to the email.

While classifying email acts, conventionalised and implicational impoliteness devices summarized by Culpeper (2008) were also identified in the data. The model was used because it provides clear guidelines and examples. Conventionalized impoliteness devices are lexical grammatical enforcers, while implicational impoliteness is the pragmatic view of politeness which stresses the contexts (Culpeper 2011: 153).

ATLAS.ti 7 is a computer software program for qualitative research which can be used to locate, code and annotate findings in primary data, to weigh and evaluate their importance, and to visualize complex relations. The software was used to code email acts and impoliteness devices. To avoid intuitive discursive analysis – the commonplace fact that people have opinions about how different expressions relate to different degrees of politeness or impoliteness out of context (Culpeper 2011), the coding of impoliteness devices and email acts were done by two researchers and the inter-rater reliability was calculated and adjustments were made. It was fortunate that one staff on our team had about three years industry experience and some of the data was from her mailbox. She explained most of the power relations of senders and receivers and the contexts in which particular business transactions took place, which helped us greatly how to make judgements from a workplace point of view. The software analysis could systematically uncover complex phenomena hidden in emails.

3.   Findings and discussion
3.1.   Email acts and impoliteness
Similar to the previous findings of Goldstein and Sabin, analysis of the current corpus revealed Directives to be the most common email act in C2C communication. 212 out of the 373 emails in

the corpus were classified as having the primary intent of affecting a Directive. Also in agreement with the findings of Goldstein and Sabin, emails with the primary intent of communicating a Behabitive act accounted for a small proportion of the sample, just 2.3%. Table 2 lists the email acts found in the corpus.

Table 2: Classification of email acts throughout the corpus

Email Acts	(%) of the total emails
Assertive	9.3
Behabitive	2.3
Commit	12.7
Directive	57.5
Transmissive	18.2

Of the 373 emails, 67 contained directly observable instances of linguistic impoliteness. These findings would suggest that the majority of high stake circumstances were handled carefully, however 18% of the total still poses a significant threat to the maintenance of cordial business relations. This was why the university was invited to provide communication training to the company. In terms of the specific email acts, emails of Assertive act tend to show linguistic impoliteness. They normally involve long lists enunciating the sender's belief, imposing proclamation of some position or a statement of fact. The egoic identification with thought or form involved in the Assertive act, minus any mitigating politeness strategy would be coupled with an impoliteness device such as a message enforcer. They can be overbearing and impose upon the receiver's negative face; such an act leaving little room for the receiver to feel unencumbered by the sender.

The sample of Behabitives in the data was very small; only seven emails were regarded as indicative of some feelings. Impoliteness tended to occur within this category in situations where an apology was pre-offered but subsequently emptied of meaning with some kind of aggressive linguistic act such as a Directive issued in a harsh tone or some kind of pointed criticism. Consider the following:

(1)   Dear X,
       Sorry for you delivery date. I'm fully understand Garment Schedule. We will deliver on 15th (best delivery date).
       Please understand our side and reconfirm.
       Y

What initially appears as an apology for a late delivery of goods turns into a rather aggressive plea for the receiver to appreciate the perspective of the sender. Alternatively, there were a few examples of Behabitives in which the sender overtly expresses negative feelings as the primary intent of the email.

The Commit category accounted for emails with promises. Ordinarily a Commit should work in favour of a politeness evaluation since it essentially benefits another party. However 10% emails in this category were found with an initial commit which was reframed by some kind of negative linguistic behavior. For instance in the course of one email, the sender first committed herself to sending a consignment of goods on a given date. In the next move the sender opened with the sentence *Frankly speaking, we are trying my best…;* here the sender compromises the earlier polite act of committing to something for the benefit of the receiver by alluding to the onerous effort being made on the part of the sender.

Of the 212 Directive emails, only 17% contained impoliteness. This may indicate the fact that

Directives carry very obvious face threatening potential so senders are cognizant of the need to use politeness strategies. Blunt commands redolent of a bondage relationship can have abyssal effects upon an individual's esteem by undermining both their positive and negative face. Impoliteness tended to occur within Directive emails when a command lacked any kind of conventional politeness strategy such as a marker of attitudinal warmth or a friendly opening and closing.

As a standalone category, Transmissives had the lowest percentage of impoliteness. When impoliteness did occur, this was generally resulted from a lack of politeness devices such as an appropriate salutation as well as questionable tone.

3.2. Conventionalised Devices vs. Implicational Devices
When classifying the actual lexical grammatical constructions that gave rise to the impoliteness found within the email exchanges, Culpeper's Conventionalized and Implicational Impoliteness Devices was of great use. Conventional impoliteness devices here refers to those linguistic forms, irrelevant of context, that carry a high degree of impoliteness or more specifically bear a higher probability of an impoliteness evaluation. Implicational impoliteness, according to Culpeper (2008), are context driven. They can be unmarked in the sense that there is no overt form of impoliteness but the power relation was distorted and indirect face threatening was perceived by the participants.

3.2.1. Conventionalised devices
Most conventionalized impoliteness devices are lexical grammatical enforcers, making the majority of the impoliteness instances. Direct complaint and pointed criticism takes up 12.9% of the cases. The details of conventional impolite devices are discussed in the following:

Message enforcers
Among the conventionalized devices used, message enforcers were the most prominent category, accounting for 61 instances of impoliteness. Both lexical and prosodic enforcement devices were found throughout the data. Examples include lexical repetition of words or the use of modal verbs such as *must* and *need* and syntactical time intensifiers as well as emphatics:

(2)   …according to the samples they approved before, the front bottom line is flat, then the front & back slit length MUST be different, otherwise you can not get different body length for front & back.

(3)   …we can not accept the rejection base on the standard or requirement which is not written in previous instruction, this is very simple !!!

(4)   We need the telexrelease, please fax us ,fax no:xxx. Urgently.

The use of modal verbs such as *must*, *should* and *need* carry a high degree of force and directness (Yasumassa, 2011; Halliday & Matthieseen, 2008). The use of *must* directly compromises the decision making autonomy of the recipient interlocutor (Yasumasa, 2010) thus curtailing the degree of personal autonomy retained as a result of the interaction. *Should*, according to Halliday and Mathiessen (2004) is a median value obligation. Whilst being less dictatorial in nature than *must*, as Yasumasa (2011) highlights, use of the modal auxiliary *should* conveys a strong suggestion. In a commercial setting where power relations are often skewed a particular way, the use of *should* would leave an agent with little choice but to bow to a superior or client. Blum-Kulka (1990) claim that want and need statements also bear a high level of forcefulness, and often occur between persons differing in rank.

Time intensifiers such as *ASAP*, whilst been somewhat of a professional cliché, particularly when used in the context of a Directive, can create an imposing tone of voice and accidentally bring about a Face Threatening Act (Kogetsidis 2011).

The creative use of punctuation was used strategically on a prosodic level as a means of impolite message enforcement; capitalisation and the repetitive use of punctuation marks featured highly:

(5)　…they may say something else again this or that SHOULD BE their requirement even they did not write in their instruction, so they have to reject the goods. Then where can we stand ???

In the example above as well as those in the corpus, the emotional intimation from the use of 'shouting caps' and repetitive punctuation marks, is easy to infer. The writer's intention in the message was to make a strong assertion that he would not accept the demand of a third party; in doing so he directly encroached upon the face of the receiver. Turnage (2007) highlighted the fact that the use of all upper case capitals in any given word is the equivalent of screaming.

Complaints/Pointed criticism
Within the corpus, complaints and pointed criticism mainly consisted of negative assertions expressing discontent with regards to a certain arrangement or state of affairs, often working so as to dismiss efforts of the sender.

(6)　…anyway all [your] points are not a solution we are working at the moment for.

The example in (6) is a direct rejection to the receiver's efforts. These constructions work so as to project discontent onto the sender and thus negatively impact his or her face. Other negative assertions involved constructions involving the following adjectives; *unreasonable, cheap, unfair, unacceptable* and *wrong*. It should be remembered that in a corpus of 373 emails, there were only 13 examples of complaints and pointed criticism. This may well be a product of the fact that such conventionalized impoliteness carries a high risk of conflict because of the overt attack on face it involves.

Unpalatable questions
Bousfield (2008) highlights the fact that unpalatable questions operate so as to criticize the receiver's position, stance, beliefs, assumed power and amongst other things, obligations. These questions can be both rhetorical and non-rhetorical, in other words, some request answers and others do not expect answers but to reinforce a statement. Nine unpalatable questions in the data were found to give rise to an impoliteness evaluation.

(7)　The front bottom line on approval sample is flat but they expect us to make front bottom line of other sizes with round shape for production, don't you think they are kidding???

In the example above, the sender used *don't you think they are kidding* to vent his anger and indirectly blame the addressee. This act clearly attacks the receiver's face.

Condescension and Threat
Condescending and threatening acts were only observed in one email throughout the entire corpus. In the first example below, the sender uses the word *funny* to satirise the third party garment factory.

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It is implied that if the receiver is in agreement with the third party then they too are subject to this supercilious admonishment; this has clear ramifications for the receiver's face; the receiver does not wish to have their positive face tarnished with the association of negative qualities such as a lack of logic but in trying to avoid this also incurs an affront to their negative face in that they are essential rendered mute on the matter and hence suffer a reduction in personal autonomy.

(8)   If you say 'ABC', then ABC will be out of the business as no company can offer money like this, and both you and I will loose the job if we do business in this way!!!

Threat is generally taken as meaning a suggestion that will something unpleasant or violent will occur. In Example 8 the sender uses the impeding threat of dismissal as a way to coerce the receiver into agreement again impacting upon the receiver's negative face by diminishing his power.

3.2.2. Implicational devices
Implicational impoliteness, according to Culpeper (2008), occurs in the following circumstances:

(1) Form-driven: the surface form or semantic content of a behavior mismatches that projected by another part; or
(2) Convention-driven:
    (a) Internal: the context projected by part of a behavior mismatches that projected by another part; or
    (b) External: the context projected by a behavior mismatches the context of use.
(3) Context-driven:
    (a) Unmarked behavior: an unmarked (with respect to surface form or semantic content) and unconventionalised behavior mismatches the context; or
    (b) Absence of behavior: the absence of a behavior mismatches the context.

Two major implicational devices were recorded in the email corpus; unmarked behavior and internal mismatch. Unmarked behavior is taken to have occurred when in the absence of an overt form or semantic marked feature, an exercise of power by an agent is perceived to be an abuse of power. 13 instances of unmarked behavior were deemed to have taken place throughout the email exchanges examined.

(9)   Re the fabrics holding for you, there are still 3 styles not paid. See the attached file for details. Please kindly arrange the payment as per the invoice ASAP.

(10) this style does not have snap on sleeves, I think u mix it up. Pls double check

In the first example, the sender pushes the receiver for an unpaid bill; this message operates as a direct demand for compensation and presses the receiver, who may very well feel face threatened. Locher (2008) talks of the importance of trying to avoid the use of words and constructions that carry negative connotations when delivering bad news in a commercial environment. The harsh negative tone in which the issue of the outstanding bill payment is addressed in (9) impacts upon the positive face of the receiver by implying an inability to pay for goods delivered. Example (10) above is a clear example of what Shelby and Reinsch Jr. (1995) refer to as an "I-attitude" in which the self-interested subjective perspective of the sender is dominant; fault is clearly placed on the reader thus constituting a face attack.
        The phenomenon of internal mismatch was second type of implicational device detected

through research efforts. An internal mismatch according to Culpeper (2011) takes place when expressions of conventionalized politeness are mixed with conventionalized impoliteness with the general effect being impolite. These usually appear at the syntactical and lexical level. In the example below, a clear accusation of blame is preceded by a mock form of politeness; *To be honest*.

(11)   To be honest, we do not understand why you never thought from a business point of view.

3.3. *Functions of impoliteness*

Culpeper (2011) claims that impoliteness has three specific functions; affection; coercion and entertainment. Affective impoliteness often refers to the overt, targeted display of negative emotion towards another although it can also be constituted by the overt display of positive feeling in a context that otherwise forbids the expression of emotional disposition. Coercive impoliteness seeks to achieve a state of realignment of values between perpetrator and target and is usually present in situations of unequal power balance. Entertaining impoliteness, takes the form of rudeness or humour applied to the target for the entertainment of the perpetrator or others. It is perhaps unsurprising that within external business email where a certain degree of professional decorum must be observed, no instances of entertaining impoliteness were detected. Interrogation of internal email between team members, and superiors to juniors may well expose a greater degree of this kind of impoliteness. Affective impoliteness (emphasis, blame and irony) accounted for 57% of the impoliteness; these utterances basically emphasized pre-existing stances and placed blame on other parties. Coercive impoliteness accounted for 43% of all the impoliteness recorded, mainly taking the form of demands and threats.

4.   Non-politeness

Locher and Watts regard that the analysis of impoliteness is complicated and the Politeness Theory is inadequate because "impoliteness is not necessarily the opposite (or absence) of politeness" (2005). They developed a more comprehensive Relational Work Framework (RW), entailing politeness, non-politeness and impoliteness. Directness or seemingly impoliteness within a community where power relation is of less concern can be perceived as non-polite or politic. The RW may provide a more nuanced picture of (im)politeness, but how far the non-politeness concept can be applied to workplace written communication remains a question. Relationship in a workplace is far more complicated and unpredictable especially in external communication; "politeness and impoliteness do not constitute polar opposites but should rather be viewed as points along a continuum" (Schnurr et al. 2008: 212).

Given that the RW framework does not have a detailed parameter of impoliteness, non-politeness and politeness, the Politeness Theory categories will be mainly used. We expect different impoliteness strategies would be taken in inter-corporate communication and relevant data analysis can prove this. After all, politeness towards a subordinate can be interpreted as an indication that "the more powerful protagonist is concerned with constructing good workplace relations and in developing rapport and maintaining collegiality" (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 36).

5.   Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between specific email acts and the occurrence of impoliteness in the workplace email of Chinese users of English. It depicted conventional and implicational impolite devices used in dealing with high-stake business activities such as making strong requests and conveying negative messages for different communicative purposes. It is clear from the research that impoliteness is more frequent as an aspect of linguistic behavior than traditional notions would indicate; at least amongst the discourse community observed in this paper.

While conventionally polite ways of making statements, stating opinions and expressing beliefs (i.e. affecting assertive emails), e.g. through the use of hedging devices are commonly used in workplace communication, negative message enforcers seem pervasive. The impolite devices used in the workplace are found in a number of lexical and grammatical patterns. Modal verbs such as *must*, *should* and *need* carry a high degree of force and directness between persons in different social rank. Other negative assertions involve constructions with pejorative adjectives: *unreasonable, cheap, unfair, unacceptable, funny* and *wrong*. The use of intensifiers such as *very* and *exactly* can also have clear ramifications for the receiver's face. In addition, capitalization, repetitive punctuation marks and time intensifiers tend to be the channels for releasing the sender's satisfaction and negative emotion.

From a pedagogical perspective, the role of English as a global lingua franca has made English training in tertiary institutions specifically focused on preparing graduates to use English proficiently in the professions. However, business English training materials fail to reflect the big change email has brought to business communication (Evans 2012). They are found to play more emphasis on traditional prescriptive pedagogy (Crystal 2006) than on appropriate use of the language, and more on politeness strategies than on ability to deal with messages with different moods, tones, personalities and styles. Employers and educationists have therefore called for more input in linguistic and pragmatic rules that govern business email in FSL/EFL guidebooks/textbooks to make them more suitable for non-native English users (Gains 1999; Gimenez 2000; Evans 2012). Introduction to the nature of business email and both its politeness and impoliteness strategies would contribute to the quality of corporate training and ESL/EFL teaching at tertiary institutions.

As Freeman has noticed, "juggling the flow of messages and the various response styles and registers makes the workday an exercises in linguistic multitasking" (2009: 106). University students, whatever programmes they are taking, should be equipped with email skills to prepare themselves for complicated workplace communication. As a result, email writing has become a major topic in the teaching of Business English, covering linguistic and stylistic conventions and its functions in the pattern of communication in business. The findings in this study can go beyond the perspective of linguistics, the evolution of the structural rule and etiquette in emails discussed in many Business English books. The examples cited can help raise students' awareness of impoliteness in the workplace. ESP teachers can also use them to design some activities, for example, to respond to offensive messages from different parties, top-down or bottom-up, internal or external, with strategies of either using polite form to express impolite messages, or delivering the discourse with impoliteness but suitable to the norm of the business community. Finally it is advisable that teaching materials and exercises address some of the most salient causes that give rise to a potential evaluation of impoliteness. While espousing the myriad of other conventionally polite linguistic options available to a sender, textbooks and teachers alike should develop elements of course materials that explore the issue of how one addresses impoliteness, softens or mitigates negative force acted upon the recipient so as to keep a business relationship.

This study, as with any other research, has its limitations. Given the fact that the contributing company control the release of email messages, the sample size in this study is comparatively small and with some incomplete chains. It is hoped that future studies in the same vein can be better equipped with workplace data to reveal more complete intertexuality of C2C business transactions.

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