



**THE PRAGMATIC STRATEGIES IN SELECTED
MALAYSIAN FORMAL LETTERS:
A STUDY OF POLITENESS, PRESUPPOSITION AND
IMPLICATURE**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to see how pragmatic ambiguity is handled by the English non-native writer of formal letters by analysing the pragmatic strategies of politeness, implicature, and presupposition in the propositions of the letters realised through speech acts, simultaneously looking at how strongly, in terms of quantity and quality, they are manifested in the selected written communication. This study was to prove that pragmatics processes are manifested just as strongly in the most restricted and formal form of written communication despite its basic notion being conversation. This study which is situated in the larger framework of discourse analysis analysed 100 written documents from three different institutions of higher learning, which are dated from 2004 to 2007. Letters are written by Malaysians to Malaysians in English. They are written by and sent to both academic and non-academic staff. These letters may come in paper or electronic forms (e.g., the e-mail). The pragmatic components were analysed by looking at the frequency of occurrences. The results indicated that the amalgamation of politeness, presupposition and implicature are strongly manifested in letters that are dyadic and restricted in nature. These pragmatic strategies are handled by the writers through their linguistic choices that are centered towards politeness dictated by distance, familiarity, and intention of the addresser/addressee of the letters. Some linguistic choices that determine politeness are seen to be typified in certain situations or actions as they are taken as accepted social rules. Though the linguistic choices are centred towards politeness, the presupposition triggers and implicatures show that the 'what' is somehow more critical in letters than the 'how' to suit with the nature of letters in being economical. Thus pragmatic considerations are just as abundant in writing as they are in spoken. Readers, just like hearers, would still have to make inferences of the writer's intention, to maximise their understanding of all the intended messages in the letter, be they direct or indirect.

حلاصة البحث

أُجريت هذه الدراسة للتعرف على كيفية كُتَّاب الرسائل الرسمية من الناطقين بغير الإنجليزية يعالجون الغموض البراغماتي. وقامت الباحثة بتحليل تلك الرسائل من نواح الاستراتيجية البراغماتية في التهذيب ، والمعنى الضمني، والافتراض المسبق للخبر تتحقق من خلال أفعال الكلام ونوعيتها وكمية ظهورها في الاتصال الكتابي. وأثبتت الدراسة بأن العملية البراغماتية تظهر كثيرا في الرسائل الرسمية على الرغم من فكرتها الأساسية هي المحادثة. وقعت الدراسة في الإطار الأوسع لتحليل الخطاب حيث تمَّ تحليل مائة رسالة رسمية تُجمع من ثلاث مؤسسات التعليم العالي التي تؤرخ في عام 2004 حتى عام 2007. تلك الرسائل - ورقية كانت وإلكترونية - كتبها الماليزيون وأُرسلت إلى الماليزيين وُكِّبت باللغة الإنجليزية حيث يتكون الكُتَّاب من أعضاء الهيئة التدريسية والموظفين. وتمَّ تحليل العناصر البراغماتية من ناحية تكرارها في الرسائل. وأشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى كثرة ظهور الدمج التهذيبي، والافتراض المسبق، والمعنى الضمني في الرسائل الرسمية مع أنَّ طبيعتها جامدة ومقيدة. وعالج كُتَّاب الرسائل الاستراتيجية البراغماتية من خلال الخيارات اللغوية التي تركز على التهذيب الذي يملى عن بعد، والألفة، والقصد للمرسل والمرسل إليه. ونجد أن تلك الخيارات اللغوية تظهر في بعض الحالات والأفعال حيث أنَّها تُعتبر من القواعد الاجتماعية المقبولة. وعلى الرغم من تركيز الخيارات اللغوية على التهذيب إلا أنَّ مشغلات الافتراض المسبق للخبر والمعاني الضمنية تدلان على أنَّ "ما" أهمَّ من "كيف" وذلك لتناسب مع طبيعة الرسائل في كونها موجزة. إذا، نجد أنَّ الاعتبارات البراغماتية وردت كثيرا في الكتابة كما هي الحال في المحادثة. ولا يزال القراء والمستمعون يحتاجون إلى استدلال قصد كُتَّاب الرسائل لفهم المعنى المطلوب من تلك الرسائل سواء كانت مباشرة أو غير مباشرة.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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A STUDY OF POLITENESS, PRESUPPOSITION AND IMPLICATURE**

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In Pragmatics much attention has been given to analysing conversation rather than written communication as the latter is left to the field of Semantics to deal with. Written language is seen to be less paradigmatic that makes it insignificant to the field of Pragmatics. What is meant by less paradigmatic is that messages in written form, typically, can be easily deciphered without knowing the writer's intention or having any epistemic context (background knowledge) between the reader and the writer. Written form is commonly found to be explicit enough for the reader to comprehend as it concerns only interpreting words and sentences at the surface level. Printed resources such as the newspapers, books, magazines, articles, legal documents such as contracts and agreements, procedures or guidelines, reports, or minutes are habitually taken literally by the readers. This is because what is conveyed is normally kept straightforward, or perceived to be so, due to the nature of written form being more restricted and limited than the spoken. In some of the documents mentioned earlier propositions are directly conveyed to the readers to avoid confusion as misunderstanding may bring great impacts on the readers or any action taken in response to what is written in the documents. The same is also true even in informal documents, for instance, in informal letters or notes, which include emails that keep ambiguity to the minimum. Raudaskoski (1999) who studied the patterns of social semiotics in technology-mediated interactions states that writing lacks paralinguistic (nonverbal) elements, restricting expressions to some forms of smiley faces or

capitalisation. This leads to ambiguity as illustrated by Raudaskoski's query, "...does it convey a person smiles at the end of the sentence, where it occurs, or does it 'cover' the whole of the sentence?" (p.42). Capitalisation may not clearly express the exact 'loudness' of certain voices. These ambiguities are avoided by writers to ensure the smoothness of communication and such occurrences in most of the formal written documents mentioned earlier are unlikely. Crystal (1995) notes that most writings avoid the use of deixis, i.e. deictic expression such as *this, that, there, now, I, he*, which are likely to be ambiguous, that is each may denote more than one reference, and require contextual information in order to be denoted.

Again, the written form has less conflict in contrast to spoken form of communication as there is no verbal duelling in written communication that needs immediate repair with the uses of pragmatic tools to ensure that communication is effectively accomplished.

Even the pedagogical aspects of pragmatic focus on conversational functions and conversational management that deal with the mechanics of conversation, such as turn taking, active listening, relevant short responses, and use of hesitation markers (Bardovi-Harlig, K. and Mahan-Taylor, R. 2003) rather than the written aspects of pragmatics.

In contrast to the views where written communication being given less merit in Pragmatics and in the pedagogy of Pragmatics, recent studies view written text as a pragmatically-motivated device of communication. The Journal of Pragmatics Volume 38 (2006) focuses on the issue of text pragmatics, emphasising that the pragmatics of text is pragmatics of textual creation that involves both the processes of constructing by the writer and reconstituting by the reader.

Using the literary works by some prominent writers, the articles look at the use of pragmatic mechanics in the texts and what drives the utilisation of these mechanics. The mechanics of pragmatics discussed in the articles however are either too restricted to a single component of Pragmatics such as Politeness and Face-Threatening Acts (Ermida, I. & Rudanko Juhani), or too generalised such as describing the move structure analysis of a text (Barron, A. & De Vries, L.). This study, on the other hand, will not focus on one but will look at three pragmatic elements in written communication at a propositional level, and they are Politeness, Presupposition and Implicature.

1.1.1 Speech Acts, Politeness, Presupposition and Implicature

Speech Acts and Politeness are theories in pragmatics which explains why people use the same words to mean different things, and vice versa, in different contexts. On the other hand, presupposition refers to prior knowledge that allows inferences to be made about the world at large, while implicature simply means underlying meaning, which may be driven by speech acts, politeness (distance) and presupposition, among a plethora of other things.

The thesis examines implicature, presupposition and politeness in speech acts in formal letters, which most of the times are created in order to get information across or to get something done. Due to the inherent nature of letters that involves these three politeness factors; distance, familiarity, and formality, writers will be inherently selective in their linguistic choices so as to ensure that what is informed is heard or acted on precisely. The formal letter is a communicative medium that does not allow lengthy explanation, thus the few words penned, or printed, would have to carry all the messages intended, directly or indirectly. Pragmatic implicatures and

presuppositions would indicate the level of politeness that is required in the formal documents. Considerations of politeness dictate the speech acts of the letters and this is manifested in the latter's presupposition and implicature. Because presupposition and implicature may differ according to context, this may result in the occurrence of pragmatic ambiguity since letters are restricted in nature. This study was conducted to see how writers of the letters handle pragmatic ambiguity in written communication by looking at the amalgamation of politeness, implicature and presupposition in speech acts.

This study analyses how pragmatic ambiguity is handled by the writer of the letters by looking at the pragmatic strategies of politeness, implicature, and presupposition in the propositions of the letters realised through speech acts, simultaneously looking at the quantity and quality of these strategies in the selected written communication. Nonetheless, the same cannot be said to be true for written communication, whether or not the pragmatic strategies are available for use to effect communication, direct or indirect, from the writer to the reader. As mentioned earlier, since verbal communication is reinforced by paralinguistic elements, the use of pragmatic strategies is abundant. For example the speech act of making a request shown below demonstrates the use of all three strategies without fail;

“Could I not have a twenty pence coin in the change please?”

(Grundy, p.69)

The presence of politeness is obvious here where imposition is mollified through the act of being pessimistic “Could I not have...” as well as the choice of the speaker to place his request in a form of a question. The uttered proposition carries three presuppositions that are:

1. The speaker has paid for something and tendered more than the sum required;
2. The addressee is going to give change amounting to more than twenty pence;
3. The addressee will be sympathetic to a request to give the change in particular denominations and has a variety of coins available.

(Grundy, p.192)

To be able to choose which correct presupposition is related to the proposition, one must be present to see what it is all about; whether or not the speaker has received or about to receive some coins and how much money was given to the addressee. These extralinguistic cues are not present in written form to assist comprehension of the proposition. On implicature, the speaker purposely flouts the maxims of quantity and manner when the proposition could be made simpler and clearer such as “Give me a twenty pence coin in the change please.” or “Please give me other than a twenty pence coin.” A written proposition as in a formal letter may not have such congested manifestation of pragmatic components as written form lacks visual contacts where the writer is distant from the reader and comprehension is less dependent on context.

Below is an in-depth discussion of the three strategies and their theories to establish the framework of this study.



1.1.1.1 Politeness

Politeness is an act of redress between the addresser and the addressee where power-distance relationship and degree of imposition between both have strong impingement on the redressiveness of actions (in this case, in the form of written). Being redressive means modifying or adding onto one’s language to make it acceptable by the hearer/addressee. By saying this, politeness is strongly connected to how something should be said, and what is said is normally adjusted to the speaker-hearer relationship, social

distance and level of imposition. The politeness theory was first formulated by Brown and Levinson in 1987 to further discuss the concept of face by Goffman (1967) that refers to someone's public self-image. The most important tenet of the politeness theory is that individuals are exposed to actions that may threaten them in some ways such as being requested, being ordered, being complained, or being rejected, which are termed as face-threatening acts (FTA), and thus this theory enables the addresser to choose an appropriate strategy in order to save the addressee's public self-image or face. Brown and Levinson propose five politeness strategies for performing FTAs as shown in Table 1.1 using a situation where one wants to borrow money as examples.

Table 1.1

How to get someone to lend you ten ringgit based on Brown and Levinson's (1987).

Risk of face loss	B & L's Strategies	Examples	Degree of Politeness
Highest  Lowest	Don't do the FTA	Say nothing. Use non-verbal hints such as emptying one's pocket	Most polite  Least polite
	Off record	Use verbal hints "I should have brought my ten ringgit I left in the car".	
	Negative politeness	With redress "Could you lend me ten ringgit?"	
	Positive politeness	With redress "Dude, got a ten ringgit you could lend me?"	
	Bald, on-record	"Lend me ten ringgit".	

Note. Negative politeness orients to preserving the addresser's self-image as a free individual and should not be imposed on by the addressee. Positive politeness orients to preserving the addresser's self-image as a liked and accepted member of a social group.

The examples given show that the strategies are naturally designed for spoken language and are not tailored for written communication since Brown and Levinson

(1987) address the users as “talk participants”. This is plausibly supported by the first strategy that is using non-verbal hints that require some suprasegmental conditions such as body language. However, face can also be threatened in the written form such as in letters of request or complaint, thus writers normally show awareness of face to achieve their intentions. A writer may choose to mollify an imposition by being polite and by ensuring that the degree of politeness used felicitously fit the relationship of the writer with the addressee. This study looks at how and how strong politeness is manifested in the written propositions of the letters.

1.1.1.2 Presupposition

When a sentence is uttered, it always carries the meaning of the unspoken since saying every single thing in one’s thought would be tautologous. This unspoken meaning that is normally understood by the hearer without being said is called presupposition. For instance, if one says “Aidrin regrets buying the book”, the presupposition of the utterance would be “Aidrin bought the book”. Without saying the latter, the fact that Aidrin bought the book (or in this case the presupposition) is accepted by the hearer and to mention that Aidrin bought the book would be redundant. Presupposition links to the veridicity of an utterance. In other words, presupposition is an inference about what is assumed to be true in the utterance rather than directly asserted to be true. For example, in these two sentences, “Aidrin is writing her thesis” and “Stop Aidrin from writing her thesis!”, shows that the earlier directly *asserts* that Aidrin is writing her thesis. On the other hand, the latter *presupposes* the idea. When the latter is written as such, “Do not stop Aidrin from writing her thesis!”, it shows that the presupposition remains constant under negation where the idea of Aidrin is writing her thesis is still being presupposed, and the veridicity of this fact remains to be true. Karttunen and

Peters (1979) believe that presupposition is conventional where they assume that there is a lexical and syntactical rule in language that governs presuppositions in any proposition. Pedagogically, Peccei (1999), in a workbook of Pragmatics, describes that presupposition can be derived even if there is little or zero context since its manifestation is triggered conventionally. This may due to the reason that by sticking to the notion of semantic presupposition, the clarity in defining presupposition is obvious and the system of parsing and deciphering is less complicated, which assist the teaching and learning of this Pragmatic tool. An example where some linguistic phenomena such as morphemes and grammatical construction give rise to presupposition is shown in the following sentence;

“He regrets lying to his wife”.

The underlined “regrets” is a factive verb where the presupposition ‘he lied to his wife’ is derived from.

However, Stalnaker (1973), who is against Generative semanticists namely Lakoff, Horn, and Karttunen, notes that the basic relation of presupposition is not between the proposition and their syntax/ semantics, but is between a person and a proposition. Accordingly, the veridicity of propositions that are often unconsciously taken for granted is a person’s presuppositions. These veridicities are the background assumptions or context that are not spoken and sometimes not noticed. Stalnaker does emphasise the association of his notion to conversation, an inquiry, or a deliberation. This study, on the other hand, observes the occurrence of presupposition in the written propositions where context is seemed to act the least in the process of inferring by the researcher, although logically it can be presupposed that both the addresser and addressee possess common, shared information.

1.1.1.3 Implicature

The idea of “implicature” was deliberately created by Paul Grice (1967a), a linguistic philosopher, to define the meaning of words or propositions that are not literally meant (non-conventional meaning). This meaning, which is indirectly conveyed, carries underlying meaning that is understood implicitly by the hearer due to the shared knowledge that the speaker and hearer have. Implicature is also linked to inferences made on the use of language that seems to be incoherent with the prior usage. For example in the conversation below, without knowing the context, B’s answer to A seems inappropriate:

A: I’m going to send in my thesis by January.

B: Really? I’m going to the moon next week!

A: Oh, please don’t be so harsh on me.

B’s answer that seems irrelevant is utterly relevant to A, resulting A to reply with such answer. The implicature that B is being sarcastic and thinking that it would be impossible for A to send in his thesis by January is understood by both (indicated by the impossibility of going to the moon).

Grice (1975) said that in order for verbal exchanges to run smoothly and successfully, the participants must adhere to the cooperative principle (a basic principle governing conversation) where four maxims are observed, flouted or violated. Observing the maxims means:

MAXIMS

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Making your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary. 2. Not making your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary. 	Maxim of Quantity
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not saying what you believe to be false. 2. Not saying that for which you lack adequate evidence. 	Maxim of Quality
<p>Being relevant (i.e., say things related to the current topic of the conversation).</p>	Maxim of Relevance
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Avoiding obscurity of expression. 2. Avoiding ambiguity. 3. Being brief (avoid unnecessary wordiness). 4. Being orderly. 	Maxim of Manner

Violating the maxims, according to Grice, does not lead to implicature as when a person violates a maxim, he/she still adheres to the semantic meaning of what is uttered. A person may violate a maxim for the reasons of not telling the whole truth, thus the semantic meaning (for the hearer to assume) remains. In the following dialogue:

C: How many chapters have you done with the thesis?

D: I am progressing well.

instead of revealing the truth about how little D has done with his thesis, he avoids giving the number of chapters to C. This act of conveying insufficient information is done “quietly” whereby C may not realise that D is deliberately being ambiguous. On the other hand, flouting a maxim is an implicature as what is said may not represent what is thought by the speaker. Flouting a maxim is a “louder” act where it is purposely made obvious by the hearer to convey what is intended; this includes how one feels. The earlier example where B claims that he is going to the moon next week is understood by both that A should not take what is said at face value. Extremely

context dependent, implicature in a proposition may be difficult to notice. It requires some pragmatic competence. Nevertheless, this research attempts to identify the manifestation of implicature in written propositions and show that in writing, as in spoken, we adhere to pragmatic intentions and goals. Pragmatics is not only a speaking strategy but also a writing strategy. Nonetheless, the audience (hearer and reader) differs for both writing and speaking.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study was carried out to see how pragmatic ambiguity is handled by the writer of formal letters by analysing the pragmatic strategies of politeness, implicature, and presupposition in the propositions of the letters realised through speech acts, simultaneously looking at how strongly, in terms of quantity and quality, they are manifested in the selected written communication. The lack of studies done on the amalgamation of the three will provide the significance of the current study, in the three areas as well as in speech acts.

All forms of communication are inherently ambiguous, semantically and pragmatically, due to differences in things such as contexts, speakers, topics and speaker intentions. However, it is also these same factors that disambiguate the meaning of utterances or any form of communication, often known to the speaker and the hearer/fellow interlocutors. In fact-to-face interaction, the correct interpretation is aided by the immediate context and body gestures. Thus, as mentioned earlier, pragmatics tends to dwell more on verbal communication as context is key to interpretation of meanings or intentions. However, the problem arises in written communication where there is no face-to-face communication, and yet the correct interpretation of meaning and intention must be made if communication is to be