# "How may I help you?" Politeness in computer-mediated and face-to-face library reference transactions

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## Abstract

Drawing upon Wittgenstein's theory of language games, we apply a pragmatic approach to organizational communication. The study extends current theories of computer-mediated communication, and explores how language actually gets used across media. We conduct a comparative study of face-to-face versus computer-mediated reference transactions in an academic library, and analyze people's use of politeness strategies. The study observes that people use politeness strategies to play different language games across media, and that a dynamic interplay exists among the three constituents of language games: sense making, language use, and forms of life. In particular, we found that: First, people use significantly more negative politeness strategies and fewer positive politeness strategies online than face-to-face. Second, language use influences people's understanding and precedes practical forms of life. Third, CMC is a different form of life than a face-to-face communication. The new online form of life shapes people's sense making and the way they use language, resulting in emerging new grammars of CMC. Finally, our findings suggest the interplay among multiple forms of life. This study offers important theoretical and managerial implications for organizational communication and the production and delivery of services in the rapidly expanding digital economy.
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To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life. (Wittgenstein, 1968)
"Thick accents and ignorance don't even begin to cover the abysmal level of customer service" A customer comment on Dell's moving some call centers jobs back to America (Newsweek, May 2004)

## 1. Introduction

Communication has always been an important aspect of the manager's job (Mintzberg, 1973). Businesses have recently begun to increase their investment in computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies, such as e-mail, short message services (SMS) and web-enabled media to support managerial communications (Bernett, Masi, & Fischer, 2002). Furthermore, the recent increase in the outsourcing of back office functions and financial services creates unprecedented challenges to effectively communicate with customers or suppliers through computer-mediated networks.

Past research on CMC has focused on material characteristics of media (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Daft & Weick, 1984), social factors (Carlson & Zmud, 1999; Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987; Markus, 1987; Yoo & Alavi, 2001), the sense making process (Lee, 1994; Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997) and the structural elements of text (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). While these studies have made important contributions, they often ignore the significance of *language use* itself, per se. Furthermore, even those studies that looked at the language (Lee, 1994; Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994) have not looked systematically at linguistic strategies that people use when engaged in communications. They typically emphasize only the receiver end of communications and focus on the semantics of language. In this paper, we extend these analyses by proposing a pragmatic perspective of CMC. Based on Wittgenstein's theory of language games (Wittgenstein, 1968) and Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) universal theory of politeness, we aim to analyze how differences *in language use* can vary across different media.

In particular, we put forward an idea that language use in different media may constitute a different form of life, even if the underlying tasks that are performed by the communicating actors remain the same. We explore this idea by conducting a comparative study of face-to-face and computer-mediated reference transactions in an academic library and address the following research questions:

1. Do people engage in different language games across media?
2. How do these different language games affect the use of language, especially politeness strategies, in different media?

We begin with a brief literature review on media richness theory, sense making and structural theories. This is followed by a summary of Wittgenstein's pragmatic perspective of language as an alternative theoretical perspective in studying CMC. Then Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) universal theory of politeness is presented as an analytical tool for understanding language use. We then outline our research design and data analysis strategy, followed by results of our study. Finally, we discuss the implications for theory and practice, and conclude our paper by exploring possible topics for future research.