The Effect of Politeness and Grammar on User Perceptions of Electronic Mail

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The present study examined the effect of the nature (polite vs. impolite) and the format (grammatical vs. ungrammatical) of an e-mail message on how the sender of that message was perceived by the recipient. Nine attributes of the sender were examined: status, gender, competency, status in relation to the recipient, how much the recipient would like to work on a regular basis with the sender, friendliness, how likable the sender was, if the message had been edited, and if the recipient thought that the sender cared how the recipient was going to react to the message. In a sample of 112 undergraduates, senders of polite grammatical messages were viewed the most positively; impolite messages were seen as being authored by high status males; and polite messages were seen as originating with competent females. No significant differences were found between the two data collection methods that were used: e-mail vs. paper presentation of the questionnaire.

Electronic mail (e-mail) is just the most recent in a long line of alternatives to face-to-face communication. The personal, hand-written letters of the nineteenth century were replaced by the telephone call of the twentieth-century; and e-mail is replacing them both in the twenty-first century (NUA Internet Surveys, 1998). But even if it is not true that "the medium is the message," we do know that the e-mail medium is different in many ways from these other means of communication (Adkins & Brashears, 1995; Lea & Spears, 1992). The present research examined how the nature and format of an e-mail message might affect how a recipient perceives the sender of that message.

Carnevale and Probst (1997) pointed out that text based communication makes interaction more difficult because it is less "rich" than other forms of communication. For example, a number of researchers have noted the lack of social and status cues in e-mail (Carnevale & Probst, 1997; Garton & Wellman, 1995; McCormick &

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McCormick, 1992) while Sproull and Kiesler (1986) suggested that although people make use of both static (e.g., appearance) and dynamic (e.g., nodding) cues as they communicate, dynamic cues are completely missing from e-mail. Static cues, on the other hand, are present, although they may appear in a different way than in face-to-face communication.

In an extensive review of the literature on language and persuasion, Burgoon and Miller (1985) noted that language is a rule-governed system and that we all develop expectations and norms concerning usage in particular circumstances. (Also see Adkins & Brashears, 1995 and Holmes, 1995.) But what happens when those expectations and norms are violated? For example, how do we react when the language in an e-mail message is ungrammatical or impolite?

Experiments in impression formation suggest that we often make use of social schemas to make judgements about the characteristics of a role, an event, a person, or a group (Fisk & Taylor, 1991). Some of the most pervasive social schemas concern gender differences, i.e., expectations about what is appropriate behavior for males and females. Eagly (1987) has suggested social norms provide a way to understand the source of these expectations. According to Eagly, social norms are shared expectations about appropriate behavior. A major assumption of the social-role interpretation of sex differences is that the perception of women as especially communal and men as especially agentic stems from the differing specific roles that women and men occupy in society. She further notes these pervasive differences in gender roles lead to differences in social status and power.

Recently, an interesting analysis of men’s and women’s speech and its relationship to status and power was published (Holmes, 1995). Holmes not only found differences in politeness patterns between men and women, but she noted that the more polite tone of women’s speech is often associated with submissive social roles.

Since context cues often act as reminders of social norms, their absence can lead to reduced attention to the behavioral norms that usually govern interpersonal behavior. For example, Lea and Spears (1991) noted that as an interaction becomes depersonalized, communication also becomes less personal. They suggest that as we become less aware of our audience, we become secure in our anonymity and hence less bound by social norms. Several researchers (Carnevale & Probst, 1997; Garton & Wellman, 1995; Weisband & Reining, 1995) suggest that employees who communicate with their supervisors by means of e-mail could begin to lose the sense of the social status of their supervisor. This in turn could lead to miscommunication that could, in extreme cases, lead to hostility and flaming (Welch, 1997). Chapman (1995) added that when people are
completely physically removed from each other they feel safe in verbally assaulting the recipient of their messages.

Contextual cues also serve to help us make assumptions about the sender of a message, including gender, age, and race. However, as Sproull & Kiesler (1986) pointed out, when there are few such cues, senders and receivers may assume that they possess the same qualities since they are unable to determine the race or gender of the other.

When status cues are reduced in e-mail messages, the recipient must decide the status of the sender based on other information. Assumptions about the status of the individual sending a message can influence how the recipient interprets the message. As Lee (1996) noted, there is a large body of social science research that indicates that status is a key component to how persuasive a person is perceived to be. High status individuals are usually considered more competent and more knowledgeable than low status people (Lee, 1996).

Stahelski and Paynton (1995) maintained that people of high status are perceived as using what they called a “strong strategy” composed of high authority, sanctions, reasoning, and a display of power. On the other hand, people of lower status are perceived as using a weak strategy composed of friendliness, assertiveness, coalition, influence tactics, and less control of resources. But how can one determine status in electronic communication when so few cues are available?

Sherwood (1998), the creator of a website on how to write effective e-mail, suggested that one of the biggest cues people use to determine status is by the way the writer of the message uses language. The accurate use of large words, but not in over abundance, can imply high status, for example. Poor grammar and misspellings can imply that the sender is uneducated and hence of low status.

In the same vein, Glassberg, Kettinger, and Logan (1996) pointed out that e-mail messages tend to de-emphasize professional titles, such as “Dr.” or “President of.” User names usually do not include clues to professional status. This is in contrast to status cues provided by a letterhead or by dress in face-to-face meetings.

The role of language in determining gender has been extensively examined. Unfortunately, most of the research has focused on verbal or written communication, with little work on e-mail. The work that has been done, suggests that men use talking for attention purposes, as a way of getting and keeping attention, while women use talk for relationship purposes and to maintain connections (Rodino, 1997). Women tend to make more use of qualifiers, exaggerations, extreme politeness, and tag questions while put-downs, strong assertions, and sarcasm characterize male language. These conclusions were based on the analysis of conversations from an Internet Relay Chat channel (Rodino, 1997).
In one of the few attempts to verify these assertions in electronic communication, Witmer and Katzman (1997) examined messages posted to public newsgroups. They found that females used graphical accents more than men did, thus suggesting more emotional tone in their messages.

The final question in this study concerns the use of e-mail itself to gather data. As more and more research is being done electronically, it becomes more important to determine what, if any, differences there are based on the mode of presentation of a questionnaire. To date the research seems to suggest that electronic responses tend to be more extreme, more self-disclosing, provide less socially desirable answers (Kiesler & Sproull, 1986; Sproull, 1986), and are more self-absorbed (Kiesler & Sproull, 1986).

As contextual cues are reduced in a communication environment such as e-mail, the recipient of a message must make assumptions about the sender of the message based on the information that is available within the message itself. The literature suggests that assumptions about gender (Allen, 1995; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) and status and competency (Lee, 1996; Sherwood, 1998; Stahlinski & Paynton, 1995) are often determining factors in how people respond to e-mail. In an attempt to tease out some of the specific components of e-mail that might effect these assumptions, the present study examined the influence of the nature of a request (polite or impolite) and format of a request (grammatical or ungrammatical) on a user’s perception of the status, gender, and competency of the sender. In addition, the researchers explored two methods of data collection, paper-and-pencil versus e-mail presentations.

Based on the literature, four hypotheses were proposed for examination.

H1: It was hypothesized that grammatical messages would be perceived to have been written by a person of higher status than ungrammatical messages.

H2: Since grammatical messages would be seen as originating with higher status individuals, it was assumed that people of higher status would also be seen as more competent.

H3: It was proposed that polite message authors would more often be perceived as being female.

H4: Finally, concerning socially desirable responses, it was proposed that in the results obtained via e-mail we would see an exaggeration of the findings noted above. For example, if the perception of gender is significantly affected by the nature of the message, then this result would be larger in the group who responded to the questionnaire via e-mail compared to those who completed a paper version.
METHOD

Participants
One hundred twelve undergraduates (80 females and 32 males, ages 18-21, 95%-+ white) volunteered to participate in the study. Fifty-seven (42 females and 15 males) completed the paper version of the questionnaire and 55 (38 females and 17 males) the e-mail version. Students indicated their preference for paper or e-mail versions of the questionnaire on a sign-up sheet that was distributed to all sections of introductory psychology (none taught by the authors). All students received extra credit in an introductory psychology class for participation.

Materials
Four messages that varied in the nature of the request (polite or impolite) and the format of the request (grammatical or ungrammatical) were created. This produced messages that were polite and grammatical; impolite and grammatical; polite and ungrammatical; and impolite and ungrammatical. Messages were one paragraph in length and addressed the need to limit the use of copiers and printers to business related activities.

The polite, grammatical message read as follows: “This is just a note to request that the main copiers and printers not be used for personal copies. Please make personal copies using only the copier in the break room. Unfortunately, there is a small charge for copies on this machine but in order to reduce costs within the office we need to try to maintain this policy. We are sorry to cause any inconvenience by the enforcement of these policies. I hope that this is the last time this issue will need to be addressed.”

The impolite messages threatened “strict repercussions” and noted that “THIS IS THE LAST TIME THIS ISSUE WILL BE BROUGHT UP.” Ungrammatical messages included misspellings, typing errors (“PLEase”), missing punctuation, and fractured grammar (e.g., “FEE 10 cents per copy” and “iT will not be addressed again”).

Design and Procedure
To maximize the number of responses to each message, a within-subjects design was used. That is, all participants were asked to read and respond to all four of the messages. Participants were asked to imagine that they had received each of the four e-mail messages from an anonymous sender at their place of work. They were instructed to carefully read each one and then respond to 12 seven-point Likert scale items.
Approximately one-half of the participants completed a paper-and-pencil version of the questionnaire during several group out-of-class testing sessions. The other half received the same questionnaire via e-mail and returned it electronically to the experimenters. The result was a 2 x 2 x 2 design: first two factors within-subjects, third factor between-subjects.

In addition to three items designed as manipulation checks, nine seven-point Likert scales asked the reader to judge several qualities of the message. These included: power/status of the sender, power/status of the sender in relation to the recipient, gender of the sender, competency of the sender, friendliness of the sender, likeability of the sender, the editing of the message, overall reaction to the message, and the extent to which the recipient would want to work with the sender on a regular basis.

Upon completion of the paper questionnaires, participants were provided with a debriefing statement outlining the purpose of the study. E-mail participants were provided with the same statement by return e-mail. Before the data were analyzed all identifying information was removed from the e-mail questionnaires.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Manipulation checks were examined to ensure that the levels of the independent variable were perceived as they were intended. Participants were asked about the grammatical structure of each message, the politeness of the message, and the format of the message. Messages were compared across the entire sample (grammatical versus ungrammatical; polite versus impolite; and well formatted versus poorly formatted) as well as within each presentation method (e.g., paper presentation: grammatical versus ungrammatical).

Grammatical messages ($M = 5.24, SD = 1.55$) were reported to be more grammatical than ungrammatical messages ($M = 1.68, SD = 1.20$), $t_{446} = 27.10, p < .01$. In addition, the polite messages ($M = 5.00, SD = 1.74$) were viewed as more polite than impolite messages ($M = 2.53, SD = 1.31$), $t_{446} = 16.89, p < .01$.

These manipulations were effective in both manners of presentation. In the e-mail responses, grammatical messages ($M = 5.12, SD = 1.77$) were seen as more grammatical than ungrammatical messages ($M = 1.96, SD = 1.46$), $t_{218} = 14.41, p < .01$. Also, the e-mail polite messages ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.88$) were perceived as more polite than the impolite messages ($M = 2.56, SD = 1.44$), $t_{218} = 11.27, p < .01$.

In the paper responses, the polite messages ($M = 4.89, SD = 1.60$) were agreed to be more polite than the impolite messages ($M = 2.50, SD = 1.17$), $t_{226} = 12.80, p < .01$. In addition, the grammatical messages in
the paper presentation \((M = 5.35, SD = 1.28)\) were seen as more grammatical than the ungrammatical messages \((M = 1.42, SD = 0.82)\), \(t_{226} = 27.57, p < .01\).

\[
\begin{array}{c|ccc}
\text{Attribute} & \text{Polite} & \text{Impolite} & \text{Grammatical} \\
\hline
\text{Power} & 4.52 (1.48) & 4.95 (1.32) & 5.67 (1.19) \\
\text{Gender*} & 3.82 (1.24) & 4.50 (1.33) & 3.95 (1.33) \\
\text{Competency} & 4.27 (1.13) & 3.94 (1.24) & 5.57 (1.08) \\
\end{array}
\]

\(N = 224\) for all message types.

\(* \text{Represents agreement that the sender was male.} \)

\textbf{TABLE 1 Means (and SDs) for Perceived Attributes of the Sender Of an E-mail Message as a Function of Message Type}

\textbf{Perceived Attributes of the Sender}

The three perceived attributes of the sender, status (power in the company) gender, and competency, were examined independently using 2 x 2 x 2 one-between (e-mail/paper participation), two-within analysis of variance (polite/impolite and grammatical/ungrammatical).

\textbf{Status}

No significant effects were found in the status of the sender of the messages as a function of the method of questionnaire administration \((F_{1,110} = 1.14, MSE = 3.27)\). On the other hand, impolite messages were seen as being written by a person in a position of power \((F_{1,110} = 20.66, p < .01, MSE =0.99)\) while grammatical messages were seen as originating with individuals with more power \((F_{1,110} = 157.05, p < .01, MSE = 2.49)\). The means used in these comparisons can be found in Table 1. No significant interactions were found between the politeness, grammar, and method of questionnaire administration.

\textbf{Gender}

There were no significant differences found on the perceived gender of the sender as a function of the manner of presentation \((F_{1,110} = 1.97, MSE = 3.33)\). However, impolite messages were seen as being written by
a male ($F_{1,110} = 42.05, p < .05, MSE = 1.22$) as were ungrammatical messages ($F = 15.62, p < .05, MSE = 1.30$). See Table 1 for details.

The only significant interaction concerning gender was found between the nature of the request and the format of the request ($F_{1,110} = 29.85, p < .05, MSE = 0.88$). Ungrammatical messages were seen as being authored by males whether they were polite ($M = 4.28, SD = 1.32$) or impolite ($M = 4.47, SD = 1.70$). However, grammatical messages were viewed as coming from males only if they were impolite ($M = 4.53, SD = 1.48$). That is, only with polite grammatical messages did the participants view the e-mail as coming from a female ($M = 3.37, SD = 1.16$).

**TABLE 2** Means (and SDs) for Additional Attributes of the Sender Of an E-mail Message as a Function of Message Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Polite</th>
<th>Impolite</th>
<th>Grammatical</th>
<th>Ungrammatical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relative Power</td>
<td>4.75 (1.40)</td>
<td>5.23 (1.21)</td>
<td>5.71 (1.15)</td>
<td>4.27 (1.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work With</td>
<td>4.00 (1.30)</td>
<td>2.85 (1.40)</td>
<td>4.19 (1.41)</td>
<td>2.66 (1.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>5.02 (1.08)</td>
<td>3.34 (1.17)</td>
<td>4.40 (1.13)</td>
<td>3.96 (1.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likable</td>
<td>4.84 (1.08)</td>
<td>3.39 (1.16)</td>
<td>4.38 (1.13)</td>
<td>3.84 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edit</td>
<td>3.75 (1.06)</td>
<td>3.36 (1.30)</td>
<td>5.66 (1.34)</td>
<td>1.45 (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction</td>
<td>4.59 (1.39)</td>
<td>3.48 (1.85)</td>
<td>4.99 (1.65)</td>
<td>3.07 (1.62)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Values represent participants' agreement with statements that addressed each attribute on a 7-point scale (1 = very strongly disagree and 7 = very strongly agree).*

4 $N = 224$ for all message types.

**Competency of Sender**

No significant differences were found on competency of the sender as a function of the manner of participation ($F_{1,110} = 0.61, p > .05$).

Higher competency ratings were given when the e-mail was polite ($F_{1,110} = 8.46, p < .05, MSE = 1.49$) and grammatical ($F_{1,110} = 509.92, p < .05, MSE = 1.88$). See Table 1 for means. None of the interactions involving the competency of the sender were significant.
Analysis of Additional Attributes

In addition to the main attributes noted above, several other attributes of the sender as perceived by the recipient were examined. A series of 2 x 2 x 2 one-between (e-mail/paper participation), two-within analyses of variance (polite/impolite and grammatical/ungrammatical) were done on these six attributes.

No main effects or interactions involving the method of presentation were significant for any of the six attributes. However, the same pattern emerged with the main effects and interactions of all six when message type and format were examined. 1) Grammatical messages were seen more positively; 2) Polite messages were rated more positively; and 3) polite/grammatical messages were perceived more positively (with one exception) than the other combinations. See Table 2 and Table 3 for the means and standard deviations and Table 4 for statistical results.

TABLE 3 Means (and SDs) for Additional Attributes of the Sender of an E-mail Message as a Function of the Interaction of the Format and the Nature of the Message.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Polite</th>
<th>Impolite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical</td>
<td>Ungrammatical</td>
<td>Grammatical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Power</td>
<td>5.34 (1.22)</td>
<td>4.16 (1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work With</td>
<td>5.38 (1.29)</td>
<td>2.63 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>5.74 (1.08)</td>
<td>4.31 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likable</td>
<td>5.53 (1.07)</td>
<td>4.14 (1.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edit</td>
<td>6.04 (1.04)</td>
<td>1.45 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction</td>
<td>5.96 (1.07)</td>
<td>3.21 (1.66)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Values represent participants' agreement with statements that addressed each attribute on a 7-point scale (1 = very strongly disagree and 7 = very strongly agree).

*N = 224 for all message types.

Participants were more likely to agree that the sender was more powerful (Relative status: "The sender of this message has more power than the recipient") when the message was polite or when the message was grammatical. And although polite/grammatical messages were seen originating from a more powerful sender when compared to
polite/ungrammatical and impolite/ungrammatical e-mail, the most powerful senders were seen in messages that were grammatical but impolite. This complex interaction is the exception to the general findings noted above.

The attribute of "work basis" addressed the extent to which the recipient of the message thought that they would like to work with the sender on a regular basis. And as might be expected, recipients were more likely to want to work with the senders of polite messages and with the senders of grammatical messages. And finally, the interaction pattern noted above was seen with work basis. That is, messages that were both polite and grammatical elicited much more positive ratings that those of any other combination. See Tables 2 and 3 for means and standard deviations.

### TABLE 4
Analysis of Variance F values (and Mean Squared Errors) for Additional Attributes of the Sender of an E-mail Message for the Main Effects and Interaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Polite/Impolite</th>
<th>Grammatical/Ungrammatical</th>
<th>P/I x G/U</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relative Power</td>
<td>27.40 (0.93)</td>
<td>116.34 (1.98)</td>
<td>6.80 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work With</td>
<td>87.26 (1.70)</td>
<td>138.06 (1.91)</td>
<td>143.09 (1.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>239.09 (1.33)</td>
<td>18.54 (1.14)</td>
<td>124.96 (0.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liking</td>
<td>172.36 (1.36)</td>
<td>29.36 (1.11)</td>
<td>88.42 (0.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing</td>
<td>17.16 (0.97)</td>
<td>1096.79 (1.82)</td>
<td>12.71 (1.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction</td>
<td>40.80 (3.37)</td>
<td>152.13 (2.71)</td>
<td>48.08 (1.58)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*df for all analyses (1,110) F_{ut} = 3.93, p < .05 and F_{ut} = 6.88, p < .01*

Polite messages were viewed as having been written by a more friendly person as were grammatical messages. The authors of messages that were both polite and grammatical were perceived as being significantly more friendly than other messages types. (See Tables 2, 3, and 4.)

The same pattern was seen in the question about the likeability of the sender. The authors of the polite messages were seen as more likable, as were the authors of the grammatical e-mail. Furthermore, the authors of polite/grammatical messages were perceived as significantly more likable than the other combinations.
Editing refers to the extent to which the recipient thought that the message had been edited before it was sent. Polite messages, grammatical messages, and the polite/grammatical combination all were perceived as having been edited when compared to the other types.

The attribute known as "reactions" examined whether or not the recipient of the message believed that the sender of the message cared how the recipient was going to react to the message. As has been seen several times, participants saw the sender as being more concerned with the recipient when the messages were polite, grammatical, or both.

**DISCUSSION**

This research examined whether characteristics such as the nature of the request and the format of the request would effect the way a sender of e-mail would be perceived by the recipient of that message. Significantly consistent results were found for both the main attributes examined (power, gender and competency) as well as a set of additional attributes (relative power, willingness to work with, friendliness, likeability, degree to which the message had been edited, and reaction to the message).

The first finding that should be of interest to those doing research via electronic methods is that this study found no reliable differences on any of the variables examined between those who responded electronically and those who completed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Although this result is contrary to that suggested by Sproull (1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), who suggested that the relative anonymity of e-mail should lead to more extreme responses, it is consistent with recent research. For example, Penrod and O’Neil (2000) found no differences between web-based and pencil-and-paper questionnaires and Schuster, Birky, and Sharkin (2000) present data that questions the assertion of more self-disclosure in electronic communication when compared to more traditional methods. Perhaps the self-disclosure difference between face-to-face versus computer-mediated communication has disappeared in the past 15 years. Or perhaps the differences can be explained in terms of the samples used—Sproull and her colleagues used employees of a Fortune 500 company while the current study was conducted with college students as participants.

Contrary to Sproull and Kiesler’s (1986) results, impolite messages were seen by the participants in this study as originating with people of higher status or power. As with the method of presentation discussion, however, the nature of our sample must be kept in mind. Students use e-mail primarily for social discourse and are likely to have had little experience receiving mail from individuals with different degrees of status and power. Therefore, they could quite likely have made use of social schemas or stereotypes when responding to this question. Since
impoliteness is often associated with people of high status in film and on television, the students may have replied accordingly.

On the other hand, competency was judged to be higher in both polite and grammatical messages. This is somewhat odd given the findings on status since there is some research (Lee, 1996) that suggests that status and competency are linked. However, they are in agreement with the material presented by Sherwood (1998) who maintained that the clarity of a person's communication in e-mail affects the assumptions that the recipient makes about the sender of that message. Polite and grammatical messages are likely to be seen as being clearer than impolite and ungrammatical e-mail. In addition, Garton and Wellman (1995) noted that people become less efficient when they use email. Hence, as efficiency levels drop grammatical accuracy is also apt to drop. However, more competent individuals should be able to maintain their use of correct grammar, even when using e-mail.

Messages that were impolite were also seen as being authored by males, while females were the perceived authors of the polite messages. These results are consistent with the work of Lakoff (cited in Rodino, 1997). Lakoff contends that women's language is extremely polite and traditionally women have been stereotyped as being mild mannered, while men are stereotypically less mannered and more aggressive.

As predicted, grammatical messages were seen as being authored by women, while males were perceived as authoring the ungrammatical messages. This agrees with Feingold (1993), who reported that female children perform better than male children on verbal tasks, including reading, spelling, and grammar. Therefore, when asked to make a judgement based solely on the content of an e-mail message, we are more likely to see grammatical messages as originating from a woman than a man.

In addition to the major variables examined in this study, six additional impressions of the sender were elicited from the participants. These included issues of relative power and working preferences, how friendly and likable the sender was, as well as perceptions about the care the sender took in editing the message and whether the sender cared how the recipient was going to react to the message. For all of these attributes except relative power, the polite message was viewed more positively than the impolite message. That is, people who send polite e-mail messages are seen as being more friendly and likable; recipients want to work with them; the sender is seen as having edited his or her message and is interested in the reaction of the recipient to the e-mail. The same results were seen on all attributes, even the relative power of the sender, when grammar was examined. That is, those sending grammatical messages were perceived as being friendlier and likable, recipients want
to work with them, and the sender is seen as having edited his or her message and is interested in the reaction of the recipient to the e-mail. In addition, grammatical messages were seen as having originated from individuals of higher relative power or status when compared to the recipient.

The one exception to this trend was that impolite messages were seen as coming from individuals who had more relative power than the recipient. Since this result is consistent with the main findings on status, it appears that both questions were tapping into the same attitude. (Recall that one question asked if the sender has a position of power in the company while the second, the one discussed here, asked if the sender had more power than the recipient did.)

Given these main effects, the expected pattern appeared in the interactions. If polite messages are seen in a more favorable light and grammatical messages are as well, those messages that are both polite and grammatical should receive the highest ratings, and they did. The lone exception concerns relative power. Here the highest ratings were seen with messages that were grammatical but impolite.

These results indicate that in addition to being polite, senders of e-mail should be clear, i.e., use proper grammar, in what they are saying. The attributes addressed here clearly play a role in determining how people are perceived when there are few contextual cues present. And despite the dramatic increases in speed and carrying capacity, e-mail (and other means of computer mediated communication) will continue for some time in the future to provide many fewer cues as to status, gender, etc., than face-to-face communication.

Despite the strong and seemingly straightforward findings of this research, a number of potential threats to ecological validity must be acknowledged. The sample was relatively small and homogeneous and consisted of a convenience sample of college students. In addition, division into paper-and-pencil and e-mail groups was done on a self-selection basis rather than randomly (although the consistency of the results between the two groups does suggest that on the measures take here, at least, the groups did not differ). And, of course, the college students were asked to “imagine that they had received the e-mail at their place of work.” Perhaps the use of these artificial stimuli in this contrived situation should be considered an interesting finding but one that needs to be explored and validated in real-life situations involving working men and women.
REFERENCES


