



Communication Strategies for Exit Interviews in Business: From the Employee's Perspective

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Abstract

Communication is a critical element of the exit interview in Business. However, studies about communication process in the exit interview, particularly from the employee's perspective, are limited. This study aims to explore how communication strategies are used in exit interviews and what factors affect communication strategies in exit interviews — with a focus on politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Data were collected through the in-depth interview with six media practitioners in Taiwan. The main findings are: politeness strategies are used in exit interviews diversely; positive politeness and negative politeness strategies are applied to maintain the relationship between the organization and the departing employee; relationship, power distance, and personality play a significant role in politeness strategies choice; advanced preparation is helpful for communicating about expressing the intention to leave.

Keywords: Exit interview, Communication strategies, Politeness strategies.

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1. Introduction

As moving into the age of “knowledge workers”, people are business’s most important asset for achieving success (Kumar, Garg, Jagdale, & Advani, 2004, p. 67). In order to retain talented employees, more and more businesses, human resource management especially, administer exit interviews (also known as exit interviews and surveys), which help to persuade a departing employee to stay, identify why an employee is leaving, and further improve the organization itself through data collected during the interview. Much work regarding exit interviews has been done to date from an organizational perspective.

However, the research from an employee’s perspective is important but often overlooked. In recent years, reference checking has been a very common process for hire. Some job seekers are worried that their stormy relationship with the former employer may influence their current opportunities. This trend that is expected to continue to grow has aroused a very heated discussion for how to establish communication and maintain relationship at the same time and achieve desired results namely leaving an organization. Expressing the intention to leave not only requires a lot of wisdom but also involves the art of speech in the workplace, for it includes potential conflicts.

In order to avert a conflict of communication, politeness plays an important role. In the public, politeness is seen as a social norm. In the workplace, politeness is also of vital importance. Making a good impression on people starts with politeness. Politeness can be regarded as the art of speech, establishing interpersonal relationships and minimizing distance between and among people as well. Fraser (1990) indicated politeness as a “conversational contract” (as cited in Locher & Watts, 2005, p. 13).

A politeness theory referred to Goffman’s (1967) notion of face work and developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson in their book *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* published in 1987 has aroused growing concern. Most of the research regarding politeness theory has been done in the linguistics field, it is only in recent years that scholars have applied politeness theory to the domain of organizational studies. Moreover, exit interviews stress communication between the organization and the employee. There has been a large body of research concerned with the benefits and perspective of organization, but more studies need to be conducted to take a look at employee voice. Given this background and based on the politeness theory, the purpose of the present study is to examine the use of politeness strategies of people in the workplace in exit interviews. Another goal is to understand potential factors that can affect politeness strategies in exit interviews.

2. Literature Review

Literature background is presented below, including exit interviews and communication and politeness strategies derived from politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987).

2.1 Exit Interviews in Business

The exit interview, defined by Gordon (2011), is a conversation between a representative of organization and a departing employee to reveal a departing employee's reasons for leaving. A review of the literature has studied why businesses conduct exit interviews. Giacalone, Elig, Ginexi, and Bright (1995) reported exit interviews and surveys are beneficial for providing information about both diagnosis and strategy, improving public relations goals, or allowing the employee for venting his or her pent-up feelings. Silverman (2001) indicated the importance of employee exit interviews, for it prevents potential problems. First, the ownership of intellectual property rights owned by the departing employee would not be taken to another organization. Second, the relationship between the organization and the departing employee would not be jeopardized. Third, the departing employee would not have a hostile feeling about parts of the organization or the employee.

In the past, the focus of relevant research on exit interviews was mostly done with the validity of exit interviews (e.g., Lefkowitz & Katz, 1969), the standard exit interviews (e.g., Hilb, 1978), and communication during employee exit from an employer's perspective (e.g., Cox & Kramer, 1995).

2.2 Communication and Politeness Strategies

According to Adler (2001), communication involved multidimensional concepts, including the exchange of words and meaning, perception and interpretation of another person, the symbol of sending verbal and nonverbal messages, as well as the complex and dynamic process between and among a sender and a receiver. Jandt (2007) introduced ten components of communication to help to get an understanding of the process of communication (see Figure 1). These were source, encoding, message, channel, noise, receiver, decoding, receiver, response, feedback, and context.

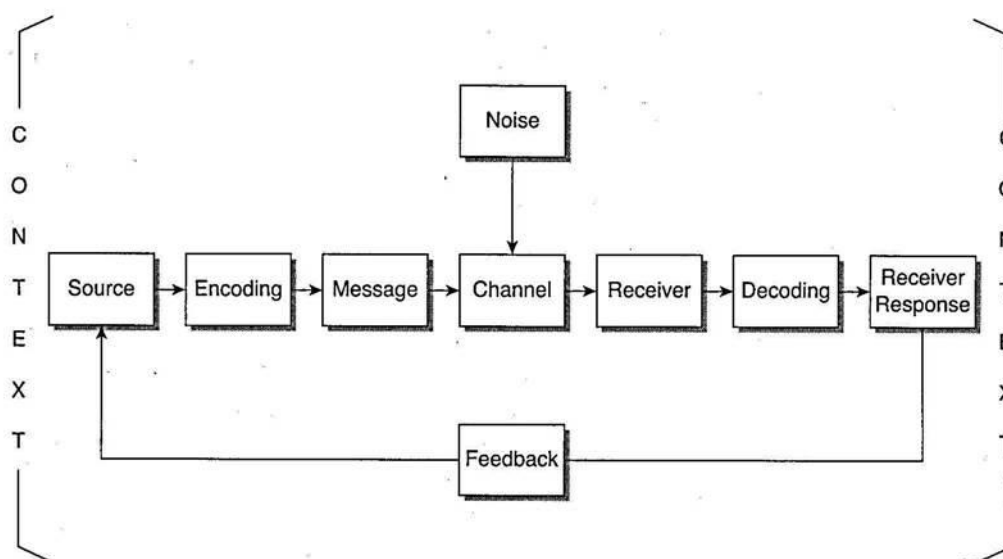


Figure 1. Ten components of communication. Retrieved from “*An introduction to intercultural communication: Identities in A Global Community*,” by F. E. Jandt, 2007. Copyright 2007 by Sage Publications, Inc.

Communication is essential to business. A body of literature has highlighted the importance of communication in an organization. For example, Thomson (2007) identified effective communication in an organization serves as a critical role for several aspects, including strengthening relations between manager and employee, improving motivation and employee’s morale, increasing productivity, and benefiting employees. The present study focuses on politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory.

Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness, which is rooted in the notion of face derived from Goffman (1967), held three factors of determining people’s linguistic choices: relative power distribution, social distance, and the degree of imposition in doing a face-threatening act (Bremner, 2006; Brown & Levinson, 1987) and contended that face included two aspects: negative face and positive face, which are two sides of the same coin. Negative face was that the individual desired not to be imposed on while positive face was that the individual desired to be liked (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006). Brown and Levinson (1987) stated either negative face or positive face would be threatened by speech acts that were named “face-threatening acts” (Goldsmith, 2000, p. 2). Politeness was used to avoid face-threatening act.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), positive face and negative face of the hearer could be redressed by positive politeness and negative politeness. Salmani-Nodoushan (2006) pointed that positive politeness involved the speaker showed the hearer that s/he was seen as the

speaker's "in-group" member and positive politeness strategies included seeking agreement, giving gifts, and conveying interest to the hearer (p. 904). However, negative politeness included the speaker showed the hearer that the speaker would not like to disturb the hearer's freedom and negative politeness strategies were, such as giving deference, apologizing, and being indirect (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006).

Aside from positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson (1987) noted depending on relative power distribution, social distance, and the degree of imposition, the speaker would choose other possible strategies: bald on record, off record, and don't do the face-threatening act (e.g., silence). Bald on record denoted the strategy that the speaker did the face-threatening act without redressive action and wanted to do it with efficiency (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Off record strategy denoted the speaker provided with an indirect statement that made the hearer interpret it by the hearer himself (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Related research on politeness theory has been published. Morand (2000) explored politeness strategies used in superior and subordinate communication in the organization by quantitative and qualitative methods and found that speakers who had relatively low power to hearers used higher level of politeness. The result that compared to positive politeness strategies, negative politeness strategies played stronger predictors of politeness was also found in Morand's (2000) research. Furthermore, Bremner (2006) drew a similar conclusion, that is, relative power for the hierarchy was a critical factor in influencing linguistic choice in terms of politeness. Nevertheless, in Park's (2008) research, online discussions of students' interpersonal communication in relation to use of politeness were examined. By adopting qualitative data collection, Park (2008) found that positive politeness and bald-on-record frequently occurred and the reason was due to their close relationships between participants.

Based on the stated goals of this study and literature review, the following research questions are formulated:

Research question 1: How politeness strategies are used by persons in the workplace in exit interviews?

Research question 2: What factors affect politeness strategies in exit interviews?

3. Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach, aiming to explore how politeness strategies were used in exit interviews from an employee's perspective. Qualitative research comprises interpretative and material practices that transform the world (Mertens, 2005). Compared to quantitative methods, qualitative methods enabled to gather deeper understanding and detailed information. Therefore, the in-depth interview, allowing probing communicative behaviors and attitudes of people in organizations or contexts (Rubin, Rubin, & Piele, 2005), was employed in this study for digging up the experience of selected participants in terms of leaving the current position, finding their use of politeness strategies, and extracting the potential considerations of the use of politeness strategies. This section presents research design and methods.

3.1 Participants

Participants in this study were six media practitioners. They all worked with different media types, including print media, electronic media, and Internet media. The sampling was based on snowball sampling. First contacts with media practitioners were asked to recommend the media profession or coworkers at work as the interviewees.

A total of six interviews were face-to-face interviews. Participants were assigned a code to protect their identity and make convenience of analyzing follow-up content of the interviews. Table 1 shows the participants' basic information.

Table 1. A summary of participants' profile

Code	Media types	Position	Gender	Length of service
Interviewee 1	Internet news	Print journalist	Female	More than 2 yrs.
Interviewee 2	Television news	Print journalist	Female	2.5 yrs.
Interviewee 3	Telecom Internet media	Specialist	Male	11 months
Interviewee 4	Television news	Management editor	Female	2 yrs. 8 months
Interviewee 5	Magazine	Journalist	Female	4 yrs.
Interviewee 6	Newspaper	Print journalist	Female	2.5 yrs.

3.2 Research Procedure

The data were collected by in-depth interview. In this study, semi-structured interviews were applied due to their characteristic of “less structured” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). This type of interview makes the researcher able to track the issues s/he is most interested in (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Prior to the formal interview, a pilot study with two media practitioners was conducted in hopes of confirming a feasibility of interview outline. Wording and grammar of questions were examined carefully. For the formal study, participants were asked to participate in an interview lasting averagely 60 minutes. General topics of discussion related to the communication experience of leaving current position. During the interview, conversation was recorded by both a digital voice recorder and notes taken. The content of the interview was transcribed into verbatim and coded based on Brown and Levinson (1987) after the interview. Data collection took place in spring 2010.

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, the preliminary results and main findings of the study are presented and discussed to response to the stated two goals.

4.1 Use Politeness Strategies to Achieve the Desired Result

The number of times that the interviewees used the politeness strategies reached a total of 34. Table 2 shows the frequency of politeness strategies the interviewees used to express the intention to leave.

Table 2. The times and percentage of politeness strategies used by the interviewees

Politeness strategy	Times	Percentage
Bald on record	6	18%
Positive politeness	10	29%
Negative politeness	11	32%
Off record	5	15%
Don't do the face-threatening act (e.g., silence)	2	6%
Total	34	100%

As can be seen, politeness strategies outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987) were identified. These strategies were used in various combinations throughout the conversation depending on the reaction of the person whom the interviewee spoke with, the communication process, and the considerations of the interviewees.

Based on the content of the interview, most interviewees began with the bald-on-record strategy to express the intention to leave. Interviewee 3 mentioned that he spoke to his manager very directly about leaving the current position.

I spoke with him. His surname is Lin, I call him “Manager Lin”. I said, “Manager Lin, I quit!” I spoke very directly. I forgot if these were the exact words, but I said it very directly. I said I quit. He replied, “What?” I said, “I am gonna leave.” (Interviewee 3)

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), bald on record denoted a strategy that the speaker did the act baldly, but did not put more consideration into redressive action. In this study, although bald-on-record strategy used by the interviewees could help to say goodbye to the current position with efficiency, it could provoke unavoidable conflicts. Interviewee 1 used bald-on record strategy in the beginning, yet the direct statement made her director very angry. She then employed silence when facing the director’s criticism.

She thought that I was a member of the “strawberry generation”, who is not mature enough to bear up under the amount of work....She challenged me, but at the time, I felt like I was in no position to argue. Actually, my goal was to leave the organization smoothly within a week. So I listened to her complain quietly and remained silent. Because I am a goal-oriented person, I can bear to listen to vicious remarks as long as you let me go in one week. (Interviewee 1)

It is found that since communication is dynamic, the interviewees would use other strategies when they gave the response from the representative of organization. According to the aforementioned, Interviewee 1 used both bald-on-record and silent strategies. Interviewee 5 also indicated that after addressing the organizational principal, she remained silent when he tried to persuade her to stay with him. In addition to silence, positive politeness and negative politeness were considered in order not to break off a good relationship with the superiors. Interviewee 2 employed positive politeness strategy to thank her director for taking good care of her during the work while Interviewee 6 used negative politeness strategy included euphemistic words to express her intention to leave.

These results suggest bald-on-record strategy may help to achieve the desired result namely leaving an organization, but it may need to be used carefully to minimize the conflicts. Another point is that positive politeness and negative politeness strategies could be employed when

considering maintaining the relationship.

4.2 Factors that Influence the Choice of Politeness Strategies

4.2.1 Relationship

Most interviewees mentioned that the relationship with the person whom they spoke with may influence the way they said.

...There is also a situation where you identify with the organization...I would imagine that if I worked with an organization that I identified with and the manager treated me very well, I would put more consideration into it. I would hope to have more time to talk to my manager to let him know that I have to leave for very practical reasons. I would hope to have more communication with the manager to reduce the sense of guilt. (Interviewee 3)

As Interviewee 3 stated, he would take time to consider if he worked with an organization that the manager treated him very well regarding expressing his leaving. In addition, Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 6 concerned the relationship with the superiors, so they employed positive politeness and negative politeness strategies respectively.

Aside from the relationship between the organization and the departing employee, a few interviewees revealed that when they talked about their leaving, they would think of future relationship between the future organization and themselves.

...Because this job made my health suffer, so I cannot stay anymore for health concerns. However, I would not tell him about my health's problem either. I don't want to let him know because reference checking is very common today. If he mentions this point [to future employer(s)], it might work against me in the future even if I later recovered from my illness. (Interviewee 5)

4.2.2 Power Distance

In terms of the choice of politeness strategies, the influential factor of power distance was found in this study. A few interviewees presented that regarding the issue of expressing intention to leave, even if the relationship between the representative of organization and the interviewees was close, being polite to each other was still necessary. The reason may be due to the existing hierarchy in the organization. Interviewee 4 used *ge* to call her superior. In Chinese culture, *ge* is the elder brother in the family. It means showing the respect and intimacy simultaneously.

...It is possible to use relatively polite words, like "Mike *ge*, excuse me...." or "Mike *ge*, are you free now? May I ask you a question?" I would use words with an easy, relaxed tone, but still retain politeness....He is the superior, so you should speak with propriety.

Never think that just because you are familiar with him, you can speak impudently.
(Interviewee 4)

Interviewee 4 showed negative politeness strategy when communicating with her superior. This result accords with Morand's (2000) research. Morand (2000) found that in superior and subordinate communication in the organization, subordinates used higher level of politeness and negative politeness strategies were stronger predictors of politeness than positive politeness strategies.

4.2.3 Personality

It is found that personality may be one of influential factors of politeness strategies choice. Interviewee 6 mentioned that because she is not a direct person, she dared not express her feelings directly. Thus, she would use a more consultative way to ask her head editor about her leaving.

...I would add, "What do you think?" I would leave room for the head editor to think about my leaving. I would not say directly, "I am going to leave, thank you for your support." However, I would still thank him for his guidance. I tend to show my respect to him and let him make the final decision by way of asking. (Interviewee 6)

4.3 Advanced Preparation

There is a special finding in this study that a few interviewees mentioned they had done advanced preparation before they talked about their leaving, inclusive of mental preparation or practical preparation. Interviewee 5 mentioned that she consulted both person in the same organization and other people to make sure that she would successfully resolve the issue.

...I know that he is also going to leave. I think it is a sensitive topic. [So I never mentioned it.] Until his last day, I told him, "Mr. Ricky, you are going to leave. Wish you all the best." I then jokingly said to him, "I will follow you." He was shocked. I then asked him how he mentioned the matter to the director and when he brought it up....Of course I sought advice from many people concerning how to say it so that your employer would accept your statement before I talked about it. I even asked a senior schoolmate who works in the human resource department in the technology industry. I not only ask person in the same organization, but also listen to other people. I say it only after I've prepared. (Interviewee 5)

The reason why the interviewees did advanced preparation may be that expressing the intention to leave is a very serious issue, which involves many complicating matters. It is suggested that the more employees prepare for expressing the intention to leave (e.g., thinking

ahead the situation, understanding the characteristics of the representative of organization, etc.), the greater win-win situation they could create.

5. Conclusion

Based on politeness strategies stemmed from Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, an aim of this study is to examine how politeness strategies are used by people in the workplace in exit interviews and potential factors that can affect politeness strategies in exit interviews. Main findings of this study are summarized as follows: politeness strategies are diversely used in exit interviews; positive politeness and negative politeness strategies are used to maintain the relationship; relationship, power distance, and personality play an influential role in choosing politeness strategies; advanced preparation is helpful for employees to communicate about leaving the current position. A limitation of this study is its small sample size. For future studies, it is suggested to explore from both an organizational perspective and employee's perspective to understand the consideration of the two sides.

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