LINGUISTIC POLITENESS IN EXPRESSING CONDOLENCES: A CASE STUDY

by
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This article presents a sociolinguistic examination of different methods for expressing condolences. After a death in the family, I collected thirteen instances of condolences which I analyzed using the framework of Linguistic Politeness. In this article, I identify three strategies for expressing condolences that rank from most independence-oriented to most solidarity-oriented: (1) acknowledgment of sympathy, (2) question of concern, and (3) inquiry for information. In my analysis, I examine the risks and payoffs involved in the specific tactics classified under the three strategies, and the correlation between the choice of strategy and the relationship of the interlocutors.

1. Introduction

Speaking about loss and death is a natural part of life, yet in American society it is a difficult topic to manage, due to issues such as a desire for a 'bright side sequence', (Holt 1993), fear of saying or doing the wrong thing (Gotcher 1995), and the 'lack of normative support' (Clark and LaBeff 1982:367). For researchers in sociology and interpersonal communication, research on conversation surrounding loss and death are worthy of study because 'these interactions are not institutionally prescribed, death is almost always unscheduled, and the interactions of the various participants are only partially regulated' (Clark and LaBeff 1982:367), thus providing an opportunity to explore what social and personal dynamics may be at play when speaking about death and loss.

For many, finding the appropriate way to express condolences is a difficult matter, laden with concerns about respecting the other's privacy while showing empathy. When asked about the act of giving condolences, many speakers say they struggle to find the right words, and many hearers indicate they feel people are not always sensitive. Being sensitive, though, can vary from situation to situation and participant to participant; in some cases it means showing involvement and asking questions, and in some cases it means not prying and

respecting the others' privacy. In their research on delivering death news, Clark and LaBeff write that the deliverers

> found it difficult to assess how much expression of their own emotions was appropriate; none wanted to appear extremely objective about the death … [but] they did not want to lose control. (1982:370)

In his study regarding the role communication plays in the adjustment process of cancer patients, Gotcher found that while 'a key avenue of social support is communication', open communication was inhibited by concerns about creating fear and depression in the patient and family members, by wanting to protect the patient and the members of his/her family, and by a desire to minimize the effects of the illness and to avoid talk about unpleasant aspects (1992:22-23). Thus, in delivering, or talking, about bad news, there is a tension between showing support and involvement by speaking about it at length, and showing respect for privacy by closing the topic quickly.

Other researchers have also indicated a need for both involvement and brevity in discussing loss and death. On the one hand, both Jefferson's work on troubles-talk and Holt's on the structure of death announcements indicate a tendency for individuals to continue interacting until an optimistic turn or positive evaluation can be reached (Jefferson 1988; Holt 1993). Jefferson notes that during troubles-talk, there is 'an intense focussing upon the trouble and upon each other' before moving to the closing, which is generally an optimistic projection, an invocation of the status quo, or a comment making light of the trouble (1988:428); Holt finds that 'speakers collaborate in looking for a bright side' (1993:189) and 'that it is possible that until the news has been evaluated positively the matter is still open for discussion' (1993:209-210). On the other hand, both authors also noted that speakers do not talk about the topic in detail. Holt finds that 'speakers do not discuss the news at length' (1993:191), and Jefferson notes that a commonly-used move, 'the work-up segment', serves the double purpose of responding to the troubles-news and preparing for the closing of the troubles-talk (1988:430). It appears, then, that talk about troubles and death varies between a

discussion of commiseration leading to a positive closing, and a brief acknowledgment of the trouble before quickly closing the topic.

Conducting an analysis of how this tension in condolence-giving varies in terms of relationship factors and of independence and solidarity motivations offers a new perspective on research related to loss. Previous work has focused on the delivery of bad news (Clark and LaBeff 1982; Holt 1993; Freese and Maynard 1998; Beach 2002), the discussions of illness by and about the afflicted (Gotcher 1995; Morgan 1995; Winton 1998; Bülow 2004), and professional-patient discussions about illness, loss, and death (Charkow 1999; Gwyn 2002), but has not explored whether the social relationship factors of power and distance play into the strategies used for delivery and discussion of bad news. Makin (2003) addressed this in a quantitative study of euphemisms in hypothetical situations, but did not use field data. Cushman and Cahn (1986) used field data to explore how parents tell children about divorce; however, they held constant the relationship variables.

The approach taken in the present paper is unique in that it uses field data from the perspective of the person facing the loss and problematizes the relationship factors of power and distance. In particular, the study explores how these two factors, proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978) as central variables impacting the choice of linguistic move, influence the way individuals console a person dealing with the loss of a loved one; this is done by examining the responses received when the author mentions the death of a young cousin. The study also responds to Holt's comment that it would be valuable to examine examples where the deceased was younger or was close to the announcer or recipient of the news (1993:211). At the same time, this kind of research is necessarily limited by the sensitive nature of the data. As other researchers have noted, it is important to look at the emergent dynamics of the conversations surrounding death announcements and troubles-talk. Yet, it was deemed inappropriate to tape record conversations in order to capture the responses to the announcement of the death of a person close to the announcer, and thus there is little of an interactional nature portrayed. Instead, the goal of this study is to examine the variation in condolences offered, based

on the power and distance factors of the relationship between the two interlocutors.

2. *Theoretical Framework*

Interpreting offers of condolences in the framework of Linguistic Politeness provides an opportunity to explore how participants mark their interpersonal relationships through their choices of linguistic strategies. Linguistic Politeness proposes that face, or 'the negotiated public image, mutually granted each other by participants in a communicative event' has two aspects: positive face, which is concerned with a person's need to be involved and appreciated in society, and negative face, which is concerned with the individuality of the participants and their need to be free from the impositions of others (Scollon and Scollon 1995:35). The Linguistic Politeness framework proposes that individuals are always balancing these opposing needs of being involved with others, as expressed in the solidarity politeness strategies of positive face, and having freedom of thought and movement, as expressed in the independence politeness strategies of negative face (Brown and Levinson 1978; Tannen 1986; Scollon and Scollon 1995). In offering condolences, the very fact that interlocutors may struggle between showing support and respecting privacy is a reflection of the paradox of face:

> On one hand, in human interactions we have a need to be involved with other participants and to show them our involvement. On the other hand, we need to maintain some degree of independence from other participants and to show them that we respect their independence. (Scollon and Scollon 1995:36)

Further, in attending to one's positive face, one ignores the negative face typical of a situation where solidarity and independence are in conflict: 'emphasizing one of them risks a threat to the other' (Scollon and Scollon 1995:38). Nevertheless, conveying involvement and independence is always a matter of more or less, not an absolute expression of either one or the other.

While many communicative acts are minimal in terms of risks to one of the faces, Brown and Levinson (1978) propose that some communication acts are intrinsically face-threatening acts (FTAs); various strategies are used to minimize the risk, while at the same time maximizing payoffs. As a result, individuals use a variety of techniques to mitigate face threats. The techniques may include strategies for maintaining positive face, such as paying attention to others, showing a strong interest in their affairs, or 'pointing out the common in group memberships' (Scollon and Scollon 1995:37), as well as strategies which maintain negative face, such as 'making minimal assumptions about the needs or interests of others, not "putting words in their mouths", and giving others the widest range of options' (Scollon and Scollon 1995:37), or some combination of the two. Expressing condolences is an example of an FTA, as showing involvement threatens the hearer's need to mourn privately; in contrast, showing respect for independence threatens the hearer's need to be supported during a difficult time. Tannen summarizes the dilemma with regard to offering condolences in writing

> You can be kind by saying something or saying nothing. For example, if someone has suffered a misfortune – failed an exam, lost a job, or contracted a disease – you may show sympathy by expressing your concern in words or by deliberately not mentioning it to avoid causing pain by bringing it up. (1986:38)

In the Linguistic Politeness framework, a speaker would choose from among a number of different comments to express condolences in an effort to serve one or multiple face needs.

The Linguistic Politeness framework further proposes that the power (vertical disparity) and distance (closeness) aspects of the relationship factor into the decision about what strategy to use (Scollon and Scollon 1995:42-43). When individuals are in a close, egalitarian relationship, they will use more positive face strategies, or solidarity politeness (ibid. 45). When 'participants are considered to be equals or near equals but treat each other at a distance', they will use negative face strategies, or deference politeness (ibid. 44). When individuals 'recognize and respect the social differences that place one in a

superordinate position and the other in a subordinate position, they will use a hierarchical politeness system'; the superior will use positive face strategies and the subordinate will use negative face strategies (ibid. 45). The framework considers negative politeness strategies to be less risky than positive politeness strategies because the former do not make assumptions about the hearer's group memberships or interest (Brown and Levinson 1978:73).

The complexity of the relationship factors makes offering condolences an interesting speech event in terms of how the strategies chosen reflect the face needs of both the hearer and speaker as these needs pertain to their relationship.

3. Research Question

Offering condolences can be seen as an FTA and thus the comments people offer can be analyzed in terms of how they mitigate such face threats. Two possible scenarios of offering condolences can be considered: first, when the interlocutor is told of the loss by the grieved and responds to this 'death announcement' with an offer of condolences as a second move, and second, when the interlocutor learns of the news and approaches the grieved to offer condolences as a first move.

In the first scenario, when interlocutors receive an announcement of a death, they may feel compelled to offer some consolation in response to the announcement. The researcher will analyze whether the speakers continue the conversation to support positive face or shorten the conversation to reduce the threat to negative face, and how that corresponds to their relationship with one another. In a second scenario, where interlocutors approach the grieved person to offer their condolences, they may face more uncertainty about whether the hearer will want to talk about the topic or not. Again, the researcher will examine if the relationship between interlocutors influences the degree to which the comment supports positive face or negative face.

4. Data and Data Collection

The data collected for this research is composed of written and oral comments made to me after the death of my cousin. For the purposes of this paper, I included both comments that were made to me after I introduced the topic and comments made to me by people who had heard the news from someone else. If I introduced the topic, the statement I made was generally generic – simply that my cousin had died or that there was a death in my family; however, in some instances I did open the conversation with the more specific statement that my cousin had committed suicide.

For comments in writing, I use the exact quotation. For verbal comments made to me, I made notes after the interaction about the comment. Due to the nature of the topic, I did not record verbal conversations.

Included in this study are thirteen respondents – five males and eight females. The participants were friends, family, students, colleagues, and work supervisors.

5. Results

5.1. Analysis of Strategies

In people's reaction to learning that my cousin had died, I found that there were three types of comments offered to me. These comments can be described in terms of their balance between positive and negative face, and the amount of risk to either face.

The first type of response was a statement offering minimal support for me and respecting my privacy. I call this comment an *acknowledgment of sympathy*. Examples of acknowledgment of sympathy received were, 'I'm sorry to hear that', 'That's so terrible', and 'I lost a family member to suicide'. Some of the exchanges are below:

A is the author, B is a female student worker in the office.

B: I was so sorry to hear of your loss.

A: Well, thanks. It's been hard.

A is the author, C is a close female colleague.

C: I am so sorry to hear about your cousin. That's just terrible.

A: Thanks, it is just awful.

D is a close female friend writing an email.

D: I am so sorry to hear about your cousin. That must have been awful for you and your family. There is nothing much I can say.

A is author, E is author's husband, F is male neighbor.

E: We're going up to see A's family. Her cousin committed suicide and we're going to go up to the funeral.

F (to A): I'm sorry to hear that. I lost a brother to suicide.

Acknowledgment of sympathy comments offer some solidarity by acknowledging the loss, while at the same time giving the hearer privacy, so the comments can be considered to be of minimal risk. One female student wrote to me in an e-mail:

> Dr. S just informed us about the death in your family. I am so sorry to hear that. I wish you and your family all of the best and our thoughts are with you.

This type of statement acknowledges the loss but provides little opportunity for me to elaborate in response. For example, to the comment 'Oh, that's terrible', the possible responses for me are somewhat limited. To respond with a lengthy narrative would seem a bit awkward. Comments of this nature, which are fairly neutral and non-intrusive, do not invite a detailed and personal response. Rather, a second assessment of something like 'yes, it's really terrible' or an acknowledgment of 'thank you' are the typical moves I made after

receiving this kind of comment. Therefore, this seems to be a negative politeness strategy.

The second type of comment received involved some effort on the part of the speaker to show support and concern by asking about my family or me, or asking if they could help. I call these comments *questions of concern*. These kinds of comments were more intrusive to negative face than the acknowledgments of sympathy, but structured in a way to show support and solidarity without imposing too much. Common questions were, 'how are you doing?' or 'what can I do to help?'. Some of the exchanges are below:

> A is the author, G is a close female friend.
> A: We've been up in Nebraska. My cousin died and we went up for the funeral.
> G: I didn't know that. How are you doing?

> A is the author, H is a female colleague.
> H: I haven't seen you around lately.
> A: I've kind of been hiding in my office. My cousin died recently.
> H: Oh no. How's your aunt doing?

In response to a question of concern, I could choose to provide elaborate or succinct answers depending on my own face needs. For example, when one speaker asked 'how is your family doing?' I could either answer along the lines of, 'they are holding up, but very devastated,' and terminate the conversation shortly thereafter, or I could answer in more detail about their turmoil and their trauma in a more involved, positive face interaction. An example of one conversation with a close female colleague (I) follows (A signals author):

> A: We just got back from Nebraska. My cousin committed suicide.
> I: Oh no, that's terrible. How is the family doing?
> A: It has really been difficult. Everyone is devastated. It doesn't make any sense.

This type of comment shows concern and allows me to continue the conversation in the way that I want – in this case, by sharing more information and, if my respondent continues in kind, furthering the discussion. However, there are a number of ways I could respond to a question like 'how is the family doing?' and I could have easily been succinct, had I not wanted to continue the conversation. Thus, I interpret these comments to be fairly balanced in terms of their positive and negative face aspects. As they invite personal comments, they are more positively-face oriented than the acknowledgments of sympathy, but because they place the face-orientation of the next move in my control, they acknowledge negative face. Therefore, I consider them to be of intermediate risk.

The third type of comment received was a question which requested further details. I term these comments *inquiries for information*. Like the questions of concern, these comments employ positive politeness strategies, but because they are more direct questions inviting more specific and very personal information, they do little to mitigate negative face threats. Typical questions were 'Was it unexpected?' 'Were you close?' or 'What happened?' Some of the exchanges are below:

A is the author, J is close male supervisor.
A: My cousin died.
J: Oh, no. What happened?
A: He committed suicide.

A is the author, K is a male associate with whom the author is not close.
A: I'm getting ready to leave town. My cousin died and I'm leaving for the funeral.
K: Oh no. Were you close?
A: Well, no, he was quite a bit younger than me.
K: How old was he?
A: He was twelve.

Unlike the question of concern, where I could choose to elaborate or be evasive, these questions required direct answers that inevitably led

to other questions, in an increasingly negative face-threatening manner. For example, in the above example, the conversation where I was asked his age and I answered twelve, the person then asked if he had leukemia, which put me in a position of feeling obligated to explain the nature of his death.

Thus, the inquiries for information, while affirming positive face, are the most threatening because they have no 'out' for the hearer who would like to protect negative face, which Brown and Levinson suggested was necessary for negative politeness actions (1978:70). An example of a conversation with another male supervisor with whom I am close follows (A is the author):

A:	I need to be out the rest of the week. My cousin died.
L:	I am so sorry to hear that. Was it unexpected?
A:	Yes, totally unexpected. He committed suicide.
L:	Oh no. Had there been any indications?
A:	Well, no not really.

This type of comment shows a strong amount of solidarity and interest, so it is highly supportive of positive face; however, it ignores the hearer's negative face. The comment invites a response with specific information, which may in turn lead to more questions. This type of comment carries the highest risk because it threatens both the hearer's and the speaker's negative face.

In summary, the acknowledgment of sympathy, question of concern, and inquiry for information move on a cline from supporting negative face to affirming positive face. Table 1 summarizes the types of strategies, the face supported and threatened, and the risk involved to the threatened face.

Type of comment	Face supported	Face Threatened	Risk involved
Strategy 1: *Acknowledgment of sympathy* e.g. 'I'm sorry', 'That's so terrible', 'I lost a family member to suicide'.	Negative	Positive, moderately	Minimal
Strategy 2: *Question of concern*, i.e. e.g. "How are you doing?" "What can I do to help?"	Positive and negative	Negative, moderately	Intermediate
Strategy 3: *Inquiry for information*, e.g. 'Was it unexpected?', 'How old was he?'	Positive	Negative	High

Table 1: *Condolence Strategies and Face Interaction*

5.2. Correlation to Relationship Factors

Linguistic Politeness typically considers power, distance, and ranking or imposition as the social factors of a relationship which affect how speakers choose to express condolences (Brown and Levinson 1978: 74). As expressing condolences is an emotional and sensitive matter, the ranking is fairly high, and speakers will generally choose less risky strategies than they would for other types of FTAs. Nonetheless, since in this case the ranking is the same for all, the power (P) and distance (D) aspects of the relationship between the speakers and myself will be used to explain the variation in strategies used.

The most common response to my statement was the first strategy, an acknowledgment of sympathy, with six tokens. Given the weightiness of the topic, and the low risk of this strategy, this is not surprising. According to Scollon and Scollon, 'when the weight of the imposition increases, there will be an increased use of independence strategies' (1995:43). This strategy was employed most often by females (five of the respondents) who were friends or colleagues, as well as by one male neighbor. Three of the respondents would be considered of intermediate distance; two were close friends, and one would be considered distant. All would be considered of equal power. Generally

speaking, then, this strategy was used by those in relationships with me of equal power and intermediate distance (-P, $\pm$D).

The second strategy, a question of concern, was used three times. Two tokens came from females who were either close friends or close colleagues (-P, -D); I also received this from one male supervisor with whom I am not close (+P, +D).

The third strategy, an inquiry for information (the comment with the highest risk), came from males: two were from work superiors who would be considered in a position of authority, but close (+P, -D), and one was from a work colleague who would be considered of equal power but of intermediate distance (-P, $\pm$D).

Table 2 demonstrates the interplay between the types of strategies used and the social relationship factors of the interactants.

Type of comment	Tokens	Power/Distance	Gender
Strategy 1: *Acknowledgment of sympathy*	6	-P, $\pm$D	Female, male
Strategy 2: *Question of concern*	4	-P, -D or +P, +D	Female, male
Strategy 3: *Inquiry for information*	3	+P, -D or -P, $\pm$D	Male

Table 2: *Condolence Strategies in Relation to Social Factors*

5.3. Analysis by First-Move or Second-Move

A second analysis involves examining the difference between those comments that were responses to my opening the topic (second moves), and those comments that were initiated by the other speaker (first moves).

Second moves are invited by a first move, in this case, my statement about my cousin's death. Since I have initiated a positive face interaction, the respondent will be invited to offer a response, and the type of strategy used should be considered in terms of this. Eight of the comments in this study were second moves: two of the acknowledgments of sympathy, all three of the questions of concern, and all three of the inquiries for information.

First moves, moreover, may be mitigated by the fact that the speaker must weigh whether to initiate a positive or a negative face interaction. In fact, all four of the first moves in question were acknowledgments of sympathy, even though two of these interlocutors would be considered close friends (-P, -D), which would generally call for more positive face attention. The amount of imposition of a first move in which the speaker brings up a sensitive, sad, or taboo topic, is greater than that incurred in a second move, where the speaker is responding to the griever by initiating a positive face interaction. Therefore, it appears that first moves of offering condolences tend to be low risk strategies.

6. Discussion

Correlating the responses to power and risk, two continuums are in effect. In terms of power, in more equal relationships, lower risk strategies are used; however, as power increases, higher risk strategies can be used by the person of higher power. This corresponds with Brown and Levinson's finding that more face threatening comments are made 'where the speaker is in a position of power over the hearer' (1978:69). The opposite is true of distance: in closer relationships, higher risk strategies can be used, while in more distance relationships, lower risk strategies tend to be used. Because offering condolences is considered an FTA, lower risk strategies tend to be used more often, even in close relationships where higher risk strategies would be acceptable.

In addition, it seems that the males in this study were willing to use more face-threatening strategies. Inquiries for information, the highest risk strategy, were only offered by males. Previous research has suggested that men tend to use strategies that place them in a higher position of power.

> Women are regarded as a subordinate or less powerful group than men in many communities, and this is, not surprisingly, often reflected in the different politeness devices used by and addressed to women. (Holmes 1995:19)

Further research on variation between men and women offering condolences may confirm whether the trend seen in our case does in fact reflect the use of more asymmetrical politeness strategies by men in situations like these.

Within the multidimensional model of linguistic strategies proposed by Tannen (1994:28), Figure 1 shows the interplay between power, distance, and the strategy selected. Where both power and distance call for interaction with lower risk, an acknowledgment of sympathy (strategy 1) may be used. When both power and distance seem to allow a higher risk interaction, the inquiry for information (strategy 3) is generally used. When power and distance call for different kinds of responses, the intermediate risk question of concern (strategy 2) is usually employed.

Hierarchy (+P)
higher risk

Strategy 3   Strategy 2

Closeness (-D)   Distance (+D)
higher risk   lower risk

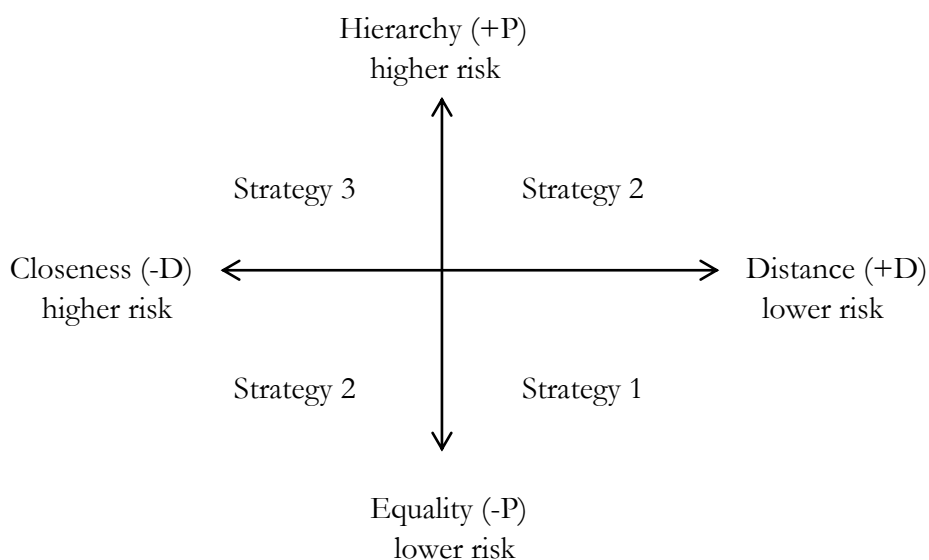Strategy 2   Strategy 1

Equality (-P)
lower risk

Figure 1: *Condolence Strategies by Power and Distance*

While not all of the tokens I received align with the proposed chart in Figure 1, the misaligned instances were felt by me as insensitive. For example, with the male colleague who asked his age and if he had leukemia, our relationship (-P, ±D) would indicate that he should use a strategy 1 or perhaps a strategy 2; instead he used a strategy 3, which

felt to me like he was prying. Similarly, when close friends (-P, -D) who, according to the chart, should use a strategy 2, instead used a strategy 1, I felt as if they were not showing enough concern. This chart may provide an explanation for some of the insensitivity on the part of their interlocutors that hearers sense in reaction to receiving condolences.

Several other factors which may have played a role in the interactions are worth mentioning. As the deceased was my cousin, and not an immediate family member, people may feel that mentioning this death does not constitute as great an FTA as would mentioning a death in the immediate family. Therefore, the responses are likely less dramatic in terms of positive or negative face than they would be in the case of a death in the immediate family.

In addition, because the nature of my cousin's death, suicide, is particularly taboo in our culture, the death itself is problematic for speakers. As noted earlier, previous research on death announcements has found that

> speakers collaborate in moving from the announcement itself and its negative aspects to a 'bright side sequence'. This bright side sequence seems to provide for 'an exit from the topic'. (Holt 1993:191)

While it may be difficult for interlocutors to find a positive side to end a conversation on suicide, speakers look for ways to keep the interaction short. However, as Holt writes, 'the absence of a bright side sequence can render topic termination problematic' (1993:209); hence there may be attempts to continue the conversation and use more positive face strategies even if these seem undesirable. Again, to use the example of the individual who asked about my cousin's age, perhaps asking about his age was a case of the person looking for a bright side sequence. If my cousin had been much older than me rather than much younger, perhaps the death could be related to a health concern. However, as it was a young cousin, my answer of his age led to more questions, and the conversation continued longer than was comfortable to me.

Finally, because I was not able to record the conversations, further information about continuation of the conversation, context of the conversation, and other social factors cannot be provided.

7. Summary

In an interaction such as expressing condolences, interlocutors offer various comments and questions which may be seen to either support negative or positive face, or both. Three strategies for expressing condolences have been identified in this study: a general comment that allows the hearer to feel supported but end the conversation quickly (*acknowledgment of sympathy*); a general question that invites a response, but still gives the hearer control to elaborate or be succinct (*question of concern*); and a specific question that the hearer feels obligated to answer, generally leading to more questioning (*inquiry for information*). While the first strategy focuses on negative face, the next two strategies become increasingly focused on the hearer's positive face, while threatening his or her negative face. Because expressing condolences is a fairly weighty FTA, the least risky strategy, *acknowledgment of sympathy*, is used most often. Nonetheless, the variation in types of condolence-comments offered appears to be motivated by the factors of relationship, with those in more distant associations choosing lower risk strategies, while those in higher power positions choose strategies of higher risk.

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