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The Distribution of Politeness Under Power Asymmetry: A Comparative Study of Korean and U.S. Business Request Emails*

Sanghee Park (Ewha Womans University)

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Park, Sanghee (First author)
Guest Professor, Department of International Office Administration
Ewha Womans University
52, Ewhayeodae-gil, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, 03760, Republic of Korea
Tel: +82-2-3277-2733
Email: sanghee.park@ewha.ac.kr

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines how professionals organize politeness in English business request emails under different power relations. The data include 120 discourse completion task emails written by Korean and U.S. professionals, comparing peer- and superior-directed requests across subject lines, head acts, and supportive moves. Politeness strategies were coded at the sub-strategy level within Brown and Levinson's politeness framework. The findings show that hierarchical power did not consistently increase indirectness in the request head act. Instead, power was more clearly reflected in where writers placed politeness work within the email. The statistically clearest Korean-U.S. contrast appeared in the head act: U.S. participants more often built mitigation into the request itself through question- and hedge-based forms, whereas Korean participants showed greater reliance on efficiency-oriented or conventionally indirect formulations depending on the power condition. In supportive moves, cultural differences were not statistically significant; these strategies were more clearly shaped by power relations within both groups. Politeness in business request emails therefore operates at the level of discourse organization, not solely within individual request forms. Sub-strategy analysis revealed patterns that broader strategy categories did not make visible.

KEYWORDS

politeness, power relations, business email discourse, pragmatics, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

Email plays a central role in contemporary organizational communication. In global workplaces, English increasingly functions as Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF), serving as a shared medium for professionals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Evans 2013, Lee 2025, Roshid et al. 2022, Roshid and Chowdhury 2024). Within this BELF environment, professionals use business emails to coordinate tasks, negotiate responsibilities, and manage professional relationships across both horizontal and hierarchical lines. Among these interactions, internal request emails directed to colleagues and superiors are particularly sensitive forms of interaction because they require writers to accomplish tasks while balancing efficiency, institutional authority, and interpersonal concerns under power asymmetry.

Request emails are one of the most common and central genres in business email communication. Professionals routinely use email to seek assistance, approval, or action, and such requests inherently impose on the recipient and are therefore widely treated as face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Brown and Levinson 1987). In email communication, however, requests rarely appear in isolation. Writers place them within a broader message structure that includes a subject line, a request head act, and supportive moves. Recent studies on English business request emails have examined their discourse organization, cross-cultural variation, and request strategy choices in workplace settings (Jung and Lee 2025, Park et al. 2021). Related research has also shown that politeness in English email requests varies across writers, situations, and readers' evaluations (Hendriks et al. 2023, Qin et al. 2024). To manage the face threat inherent in request emails, writers rely on politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a widely used framework for examining how speakers manage FTAs through systematic strategy selection.

Politeness strategy use does not follow a single universal standard. Social and cultural norms shape what counts as appropriate politeness (Locher and Watts 2005), and strategies considered acceptable may differ across contexts. When such differences go unrecognized, requests may be interpreted as overly direct or excessively distant, leading to miscommunication and relational tension (Watts 2003). In global business settings, how writers manage politeness directly affects both task accomplishment and relationship maintenance (AlAfnan 2014). Brown and Levinson (1987) identify power, social distance, and degree of imposition as central variables in politeness strategy use. In business email communication, however, social distance and imposition often vary with individual perception and situational context. Power, by contrast, is tied to formally defined hierarchical roles and can therefore be examined more consistently. Even when power is institutionally defined, however, it does not prescribe a single form of politeness. What counts as appropriate deference depends on locally shared expectations about hierarchy and professional conduct (Spencer-Oatey 2008).

Previous research on email politeness has advanced our understanding of relational work in written interaction. Much of this work, however, has focused on academic contexts, particularly student–faculty communication (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Codina-Espurz 2021, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). In such settings, hierarchical roles are institutionally fixed and socially recognized, and power asymmetry often functions as a stable background condition rather than an analytical focus. In business settings, scholars have shown that politeness strategy use varies across relational and cultural contexts (AlAfnan 2014, Kim and Lee 2017, Wang and Gao 2021). For instance, Kim and Lee (2017) examined politeness strategies in power-asymmetrical email requests produced by Korean and U.S. corporate employees. Their analysis incorporated both power and relational variables such as familiarity and showed that cultural background influences the realization of requests in hierarchical business contexts. These studies usually treat power as one contextual variable among many. Less attention has been paid to how institutional power shapes where politeness is realized across the different parts of a business request email.

This study examines how institutional power shapes politeness in business request emails. It compares Korean and U.S. professionals as workplace email writers situated in different national and professional contexts. Because Korean and U.S. business communication has often been discussed in relation to different orientations toward workplace hierarchy (Hofstede 2001), these groups offer a relevant comparison for examining request writing under power asymmetry. The analysis focuses on how politeness is distributed across subject lines, head acts, and supportive moves, and how power interacts with participants' national and professional backgrounds in request writing. The study addresses the following questions:

(1) How does institutional power shape the distribution of politeness strategies across head acts, supportive moves, and subject lines in business request emails?
(2) How do these patterns vary between Korean and U.S. professionals?

2. Literature review

2.1 Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides the analytical foundation for the present study. Building on Goffman's concept of face (1967), the theory explains how interactants manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) in communication. It distinguishes between positive face, the desire to be liked and approved of, and negative face, the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Requests inherently threaten the recipient's negative face by constraining freedom of action, while also placing the speaker's positive face at risk if the request is rejected (Brown and Levinson 1987, Trosborg 2011). Requests are therefore well suited for analysis within this framework. In workplace contexts, request emails require writers to balance task accomplishment with the maintenance of professional relationships, making face management a central interactional concern (Ho 2018).

Brown and Levinson conceptualize this process through a typology of four politeness strategies: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies, along with the option of not performing the act. These strategy types differ in the degree of directness and the extent to which face threat is mitigated. Bald-on-record strategies express requests explicitly without redressive action and are typically associated with efficiency or urgency. Positive politeness strategies attend to the recipient's positive face by emphasizing solidarity or shared understanding. Negative politeness strategies acknowledge the imposition of the request and employ mitigation or indirectness to allow room for refusal. Off-record strategies convey the request indirectly through hints or implicit expressions requiring interpretation by the recipient. Brown and Levinson further specify sub-strategies within each category, identifying fifteen positive politeness, ten negative politeness, four bald-on-record, and fifteen off-record sub-strategies. In the present study, politeness is analyzed at both the strategy-type and sub-strategy levels, allowing for comparison of overall strategic orientation as well as fine-grained analysis of linguistic realization in business request emails. A full list of the sub-strategies used is provided in Appendix A.

Brown and Levinson argue that these strategic options are systematically organized according to whether, and how, a face-threatening act is performed. These strategic options range from performing the FTA on record, with or without redressive action, to performing it off record or avoiding the act altogether, as illustrated in Figure 1.

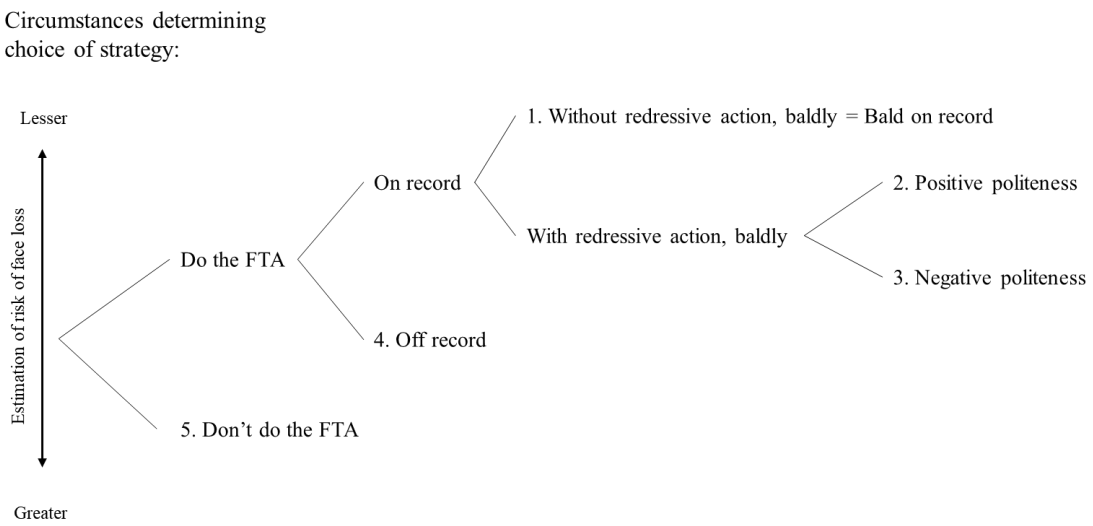

Figure 1. Politeness Strategy Selection in Face-threatening Acts (Adapted from Brown and Levinson 1987)

Although the framework has been criticized for its claims to universality and its emphasis on individual strategic choice (Ide 1989, Matsumoto 1988, Watts 2003), these critiques do not disqualify it for the present purposes. They indicate, rather, that it should be applied as an analytical coding instrument within a specific institutional context, rather than as a universal account of politeness. Its cross-cultural comparability at the sub-strategy level has been established across professional and institutional genres (AlAfnan 2014, Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Nickerson 2000), which motivates its adoption here.

2.2 Reconsidering Brown and Levinson's Weightiness Model: Power and Discourse Organization in Workplace Email

Central to Brown and Levinson's framework is the notion of weightiness, defined as the estimated risk of face loss associated with performing a given act. Weightiness is determined by three social variables: power, social distance, and the rank of imposition. As weightiness increases, speakers are more likely to employ redressive action or, in some cases, to avoid the act altogether. Importantly, this relationship is probabilistic rather than deterministic: higher weightiness increases the likelihood of mitigation but does not prescribe a fixed progression toward greater indirectness (Fraser 2005).

In request research, this probabilistic logic has often been simplified. Some studies have treated power asymmetry primarily in terms of increased indirectness in upward requests (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). Such interpretations risk reducing the weightiness model to a scalar prediction of indirectness. Brown and Levinson's account, however, is more limited: it predicts an increased likelihood of redressive action, but does not specify the form that redress must take or where it should be realized in the discourse.

This limitation becomes particularly relevant in the analysis of workplace email. Business request emails are structured messages composed of multiple functional components, including subject lines, openings, the head act, and supportive moves, each contributing differently to relational and transactional goals (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Ho 2018). In this context, politeness is not confined to the request head act. Workplace and institutional research shows that lower-status writers often maintain relatively direct request formulations while allocating relational and mitigating work to surrounding parts of the message, such as openings, grounders, and closings (Bargiela-

Chiappini and Harris 1996, Harris 2003, Holmes and Stubbe 2015, Zhu 2017). An exclusive focus on head act indirectness therefore risks underestimating the extent of facework in professional written communication.

These considerations suggest that the distribution of politeness across email components constitutes a discourse-structural dimension of facework that is not captured when the weightiness model is interpreted primarily in terms of indirectness. From this perspective, power does not operate only by increasing or decreasing mitigation in the head act. It also shapes how relational work is organized within the message. This reconceptualization extends the application of Brown and Levinson's framework by specifying how redressive action is distributed across extended written discourse, rather than treating it as a property of the request form alone.

This perspective is further informed by Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework, which conceptualizes interpersonal communication as the management of social relations through face sensitivities and sociality rights, realized through the coordinated use of multiple discourse resources. In the present study, Brown and Levinson's framework is used to code politeness strategies and sub-strategies, while rapport management provides an interpretive lens for explaining why the structural placement of relational work, not only its linguistic form, constitutes a meaningful dimension of facework.

2.3 Power as an Institutional Variable in Business Request Emails

In workplace interaction, power is best understood as institutionally grounded, role-based authority embedded in organizational hierarchies (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1996). From a discourse-analytic perspective, power derives from formally assigned positions and is legitimized through access to decision-making rights, resources, and the ability to impose obligations on others (Oandasan 2021). As a structural condition, power shapes expectations regarding who may legitimately make requests, how those requests should be formulated, and how much mitigation is normatively required in professional interaction (Brown and Levinson 1987, Nickerson 2000).

One key way institutional power becomes interactionally relevant is through request directionality. Requests addressed upward, downward, or horizontally within an organization carry different expectations of entitlement, accountability, and face management (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1996). Superiors are generally afforded greater entitlement to issue directives or minimally mitigated requests, whereas subordinates are expected to orient to authority through increased mitigation and indirectness (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, Nickerson 2000). These asymmetries reflect shared organizational norms.

Research on Korean workplace communication highlights the salience of institutional hierarchy and seniority in request formulation. Subordinates addressing superiors commonly employ modalized interrogatives, preparatory moves, and extensive supportive strategies to acknowledge rank differences and mitigate imposition (Jung and Lee 2025, Kim and Lee 2017). At the same time, power in Korean corporate contexts is not enacted solely in a top-down manner. Superiors also strategically use mitigated request forms to maintain relational harmony and facilitate cooperation, indicating that power is interactionally managed rather than mechanically exercised (Kim and Lee 2017, Lee 2012).

In contrast, studies of U.S. workplace interaction suggest that although institutional hierarchy is recognized, its linguistic expression is often attenuated by norms of egalitarianism and task orientation (Jung and Lee 2025, Lee 2012). Requests are often treated as routine tools for task coordination, especially in peer interactions (Nickerson 2000, Park and Jeon 2026). In such contexts, directness may be interpreted as efficiency rather than as imposition, and mitigation is deployed selectively in response to situational demands, not solely on the basis of hierarchical position (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011).

Despite the acknowledged relevance of power in workplace interaction, politeness research on email

communication has not consistently treated power as a central analytical focus. Within the Brown and Levinson framework, power is typically examined alongside social distance and imposition as part of an overall weightiness calculation, often functioning as a contextual parameter rather than an independent variable (Brown and Levinson 1987, Oandasan 2021). Even in studies of workplace emails, power is frequently operationalized as a binary background condition or examined in combination with other factors, making its specific effects difficult to isolate (AlAfnan 2014, Wang and Gao 2021). Recent findings further suggest that the influence of hierarchical rank is contingent on situational factors such as task demands and degree of imposition (Jung and Lee 2025), underscoring the need to examine power within clearly specified role relations and controlled communicative contexts. Against this backdrop, this study examines institutional power as a central variable in the politeness strategies used in business request emails by Korean and U.S. professionals.

3. Data and Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a discourse-analytic design to examine how workplace professionals select and realize politeness strategies in business request emails. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory as the analytical framework, the study focuses on two variables: power relations and cultural background. In this study, power refers specifically to institutionally assigned, role-based authority within organizational hierarchies (hereafter, power). Power relations were operationalized through the writer–recipient relationship, distinguishing between requests addressed to superiors and requests addressed to peers. Cultural background was operationalized as participants' national affiliation and professional experience as Korean and U.S. workplace email writers.

The study adopts a between-subjects design. A total of 120 workplace professionals participated, including 60 Korean and 60 U.S. participants. Within each cultural group, participants were evenly assigned to one of two recipient conditions: writing a request email addressed to a superior or to a peer. Thirty Korean professionals and thirty U.S. professionals completed the superior-directed condition, while the remaining thirty Korean and thirty U.S. professionals completed the peer-directed condition. Each participant completed one discourse completion task, resulting in a single request email. This design was adopted to minimize potential carryover effects between request-writing tasks. Having participants produce both peer- and superior-directed requests could encourage strategic reuse of linguistic material across emails, thereby compromising the independence of the data. In addition, limiting each participant to a single task reduced participant burden and supported more focused email production.

Two parallel request scenarios were developed to correspond to the recipient's role and to involve comparable levels of imposition. In both scenarios, the writer–recipient relationship was specified as task-oriented and professionally distant, with no indication of personal closeness. This procedure resulted in four balanced datasets crossing culture (Korean vs. U.S.) and recipient role (superior vs. peer). For analysis, each email was segmented into three functional components: the subject line, the head act, and supportive moves. Politeness strategies were identified and coded within each component to examine how politeness was distributed across the email.

3.2 Participants

A total of 120 office professionals participated in this study, including 60 Korean and 60 U.S. professionals. All participants reported using English regularly for workplace email communication and had prior experience

composing business request emails. Korean participants were recruited through snowball sampling. At the beginning of the survey, they were screened for workplace experience in writing English request emails, and those who did not meet this criterion were excluded. The Korean sample consisted of office-based professionals working in global corporate settings, mainly in IT, law firms, and electronics companies. U.S. participants were recruited through an online panel provider using screening criteria for office-based professionals and were compensated. Participants represented a range of office-based professional roles and had approximately five to fifteen years of work experience. The Korean participants had an average of 10.8 years of work experience (*SD* = 4.2), while the U.S. participants averaged 11.3 years (*SD* = 4.6). The mean age of the Korean group was 33.4 years (*SD* = 3.8), and that of the U.S. group was 34.1 years (*SD* = 4.1). To reduce potential age-related variation in politeness strategy use, the study targeted professionals between 25 and 40 years of age. The Korean group consisted of twenty-four men (40.0%) and thirty-six women (60.0%), and the U.S. group consisted of twenty-six men (43.3%) and thirty-four women (56.7%).

3.3 Data Collection and Procedures

To enable systematic comparison of politeness strategy use in business request emails, this study collected data using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT). DCTs remain widely used in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics because they allow researchers to elicit targeted speech acts while maintaining control over key situational and social variables (Ackermann 2023, Billmyer and Varghese 2000, Brocca and Nuzzo 2024, Nuzzo and Cortés 2020). Although naturally occurring workplace emails offer high ecological validity, they are less suitable for controlled comparison. Request content, recipient relationships, and situational contexts vary widely across authentic emails, and ethical and confidentiality constraints further limit access to such data. In business email communication in particular, variation in imposition level and contextual conditions makes it difficult to isolate the effects of individual variables on politeness strategy use (Freytag 2019). To address these challenges, the present study employed role-adjusted, parallel request scenarios and held key situational factors constant.

The study used role-adjusted scenarios, with peer- and superior-directed requests drawn from different but functionally comparable situations. Prior research informed this decision, as the types of requests that professionals find highly imposing differ depending on the recipient's institutional role. In particular, a Delphi-based study of Korean workplace professionals identified 'requesting peers to take over tasks on behalf of the requester and requesting superiors to suggest solutions for difficult work-related problems' as among the most face-threatening and burdensome request situations in professional email communication (Park and Jeon 2026).

Drawing on these findings, the present study designed distinct scenarios for peer and superior conditions to capture role-specific sources of imposition, while remaining directly tied to tasks for which the writer was responsible. Accordingly, the peer scenario involved asking a colleague to deliver a presentation on the writer’s behalf due to a scheduling conflict, whereas the superior scenario involved asking a supervisor to intervene with another department to negotiate a deadline extension. While the surface content of the scenarios differed, both were designed to be comparable in their overall level of perceived face threat, differing primarily in the recipient’s institutional role. Both scenarios were reviewed by workplace professionals to ensure that they were realistic and plausible within typical workplace settings. However, perceived imposition was not independently measured or statistically validated in the present study. Full descriptions of the scenarios are provided in Appendix B.

3.4 Analytical Framework and Coding Procedures

This study analyzes politeness strategies in business request emails using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory as the analytical framework. Because request emails are not single utterances but discourse-level products composed of multiple functional elements, the analysis distinguishes politeness strategies according to their functional position within the email. Three analytical units were identified: the subject line, the head act that performs the request, and supportive moves, defined as all non-head-act moves that support, justify, or frame the request.

Politeness strategies were analyzed using a multi-level framework that distinguishes between main strategies and sub-strategies. At the main strategy level, strategies were categorized into four types: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. This categorization captured the overall strategic orientation of requests and broad patterns of face management. At the sub-strategy level, all strategies were coded within each category, allowing for a fine-grained examination of how politeness was linguistically realized. The full coding framework and operational definitions of sub-strategies are provided in Appendix A.

The sampling unit was the individual email, with 30 emails in each participant-group-by-power condition. The coding unit was the sentence-level strategy instance within each functional component. Thus, the frequency counts reported in the results represent coded strategy instances, not the number of emails. This distinction is important because one email could contain more than one request head act as well as multiple supportive moves. Request-bearing sentences were coded as head acts, whereas sentences that justified, mitigated, praised, apologized, expressed gratitude, or otherwise framed the request were coded as supportive moves. The analysis therefore did not reduce each email to a single politeness code. It retained the number and distribution of coded strategies within each email, since the extent to which writers elaborated or compressed their requests was itself an important feature of the data. When a single sentence contained more than one possible strategy, it was assigned one primary sub-strategy code based on the sentence's main pragmatic function in context. Ambiguous cases were reviewed with the second coder and resolved through discussion. All data were coded using NVivo. To ensure coding reliability, a second coder with doctoral training in English education independently coded a subset of the data. Intercoder agreement was high (Cohen's $\kappa = .86$), and discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

3.5 Statistical Analysis

Data analysis combined qualitative discourse analysis, descriptive statistics, and inferential tests to identify patterns of strategy use across email units. First, within-culture comparisons were conducted to examine differences in politeness strategy use between emails addressed to superiors and those addressed to colleagues. Second, cross-cultural comparisons were carried out to compare politeness strategy use between Korean and U.S. professionals under equivalent power conditions. Politeness strategies were further examined in relation to their functional positions within the email in order to identify discourse-level patterns of strategy deployment. To examine whether strategy distributions differed across cultural and power conditions, chi-square tests of independence were conducted. Because several contingency tables contained low-frequency cells, Monte Carlo simulated p-values were used. Cramer's V was reported as an effect-size measure. Statistical tests were conducted for head acts and supportive moves, while subject-line analyses were reported descriptively due to highly skewed distributions. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics.

4. Results

This section reports how politeness strategies are realized in business request emails across three functional positions: the head act (the move that performs the request), supportive moves (the surrounding text outside the head act), and the subject lines. The analysis compares emails written by Korean and U.S. workplace professionals across peer- and superior-directed requests, focusing on differences associated with cultural background and power relations. Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution of politeness strategies across the three email units and the four participant groups. The following sections present the main strategy and sub-strategy analyses for head acts, supportive moves, and subject lines. Where appropriate, group comparisons are supported by chi-square tests with Monte Carlo simulated p-values; subject-line patterns are reported descriptively because of highly skewed distributions.

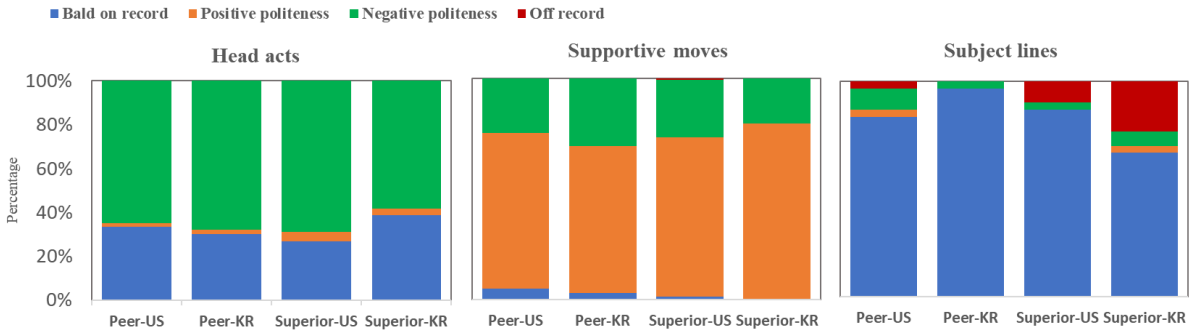

Figure 2. Percentage Distribution of Politeness Strategy Types across Email Units and Participant Groups

4.1 Head Acts

In head acts, both Korean and U.S. professionals most frequently used negative politeness strategies across all conditions. This pattern held in both peer-directed and superior-directed requests. Among Korean professionals, negative politeness predominated in both peer-directed (n = 36) and superior-directed (n = 39) emails, followed by bald-on-record strategies (peer: n = 16; superior: n = 26). U.S. professionals showed a similar distribution, with negative politeness most frequent in peer-directed (n = 41) and superior-directed (n = 31) emails, followed by bald-on-record strategies (peer: n = 21; superior: n = 12). Positive politeness occurred only rarely, and no off-record strategies were observed. As shown in Table 1, differences across power and cultural conditions were not statistically significant.

Table 1. Distribution of Politeness Strategies in Head Acts

Politeness strategy	KR		US	
	Peer	Superior	Peer	Superior
Bald on record	16	26	21	12
Positive politeness	1	2	1	2
Negative politeness	36	39	41	31
Off record	0	0	0	0
Total	53	67	63	45

Note. Statistical results for group comparisons are reported with Monte Carlo simulated p-values.
(1) Culture (US vs. KR): Peer, $\chi^2 = 0.14$, $p = .918$, $V = .04$; Superior, $\chi^2 = 1.82$, $p = .452$, $V = .13$
(2) Power (Peer vs. Superior): US, $\chi^2 = 1.21$, $p = .546$, $V = .11$; KR, $\chi^2 = 1.22$, $p = .541$, $V = .10$

At the sub-strategy level, clearer differences emerged. Korean professionals showed a notable shift across power conditions: conventional indirectness (N1, $n = 19$) was the most frequent sub-strategy in peer-directed head acts, whereas emphasize efficiency (B2, $n = 26$) predominated in superior-directed head acts. Question/hedge (N2) and going on record as incurring a debt (N10) remained relatively stable across conditions. U.S. professionals, by contrast, consistently relied on question or hedge (N2) as the most frequent sub-strategy in both peer-directed ($n = 24$) and superior-directed ($n = 18$) head acts, with other sub-strategies showing more limited variation across conditions (see Table 2). These patterns are reflected in the linguistic realization of head acts, as illustrated below.

(1) Peer-KR: Would you be able to cover the marketing plan presentation for me? (N1: Be conventionally indirect)
(2) Superior-KR: Please coordinate the schedule with the PR team. (B2: Emphasize efficiency)
(3) Peer-US: I was wondering if you could take a look at the revised draft when you have a chance. (N2: Question/Hedge)

Table 2. Distribution of Politeness Sub-Strategies in Head Acts

Sub-strategy	KR		US	
	Peer	Superior	Peer	Superior
B1 Emphasize urgency	3	0	7	1
B2 Emphasize efficiency	13	26	13	11
B3 Explicitly mark power asymmetry	0	0	1	0
N1 Be conventionally indirect	19	21	2	9
N2 Question / hedge	10	11	24	18
N10 Go on record as incurring a debt	7	7	15	4
P11 Be optimistic	1	0	1	1
P12 Include both speaker and hearer	0	2	0	1

Note. Includes only sub-strategies observed in the data.

The head-act sub-strategy analysis revealed distinctions that were not visible at the main strategy level. As shown in Table 3, cultural differences were significant in both peer-directed requests ($\chi^2 = 24.36$, $p < .001$, $V = .46$) and superior-directed requests ($\chi^2 = 11.86$, $p = .042$, $V = .33$). In peer-directed requests, Korean professionals relied more heavily on conventional indirectness, whereas U.S. professionals used more question/hedge forms and debt-incurring expressions. In superior-directed requests, Korean professionals showed a stronger concentration in efficiency-oriented and conventionally indirect strategies, while U.S. professionals used relatively more hedge-based forms. Power-related differences were significant only in the U.S. data ($\chi^2 = 15.79$, $p = .012$, $V = .38$). In contrast, the Korean data did not show a significant peer–superior difference ($\chi^2 = 8.97$, $p = .142$, $V = .27$).

Table 3. Statistical Tests of Head Act Sub-Strategy Distributions

Comparison	χ^2	p	Cramer's V
Culture: Peer, US vs KR	24.36	< .001***	0.46
Culture: Superior, US vs KR	11.86	0.042*	0.33
Power: US, Peer vs Superior	15.79	0.012*	0.38
Power: KR, Peer vs Superior	8.97	0.142	0.27

Note. Monte Carlo simulated p-values are reported. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

4.2 Supportive Moves

In supportive moves, positive politeness was the most frequently used strategy type across all conditions in both groups. Among Korean professionals, positive politeness predominated in both peer-directed (n = 130) and superior-directed (n = 177) emails, followed by negative politeness (peer: n = 60; superior: n = 46) and bald-on-record strategies (peer: n = 6; superior: n = 1), with no off-record strategies observed in either condition. U.S. professionals showed a parallel pattern, with positive politeness predominating in both peer-directed (n = 187) and superior-directed (n = 116) emails, followed by negative politeness (peer: n = 65; superior: n = 42) and bald-on-record strategies (peer: n = 13; superior: n = 2), with one off-record strategy observed in superior-directed emails (see Table 4). Cross-cultural differences in main strategy distributions were not statistically significant in either peer- or superior-directed contexts. Within-group power comparisons were also not significant in the U.S. data. In contrast, the Korean data showed a significant peer–superior difference, reflecting a shift toward greater reliance on positive politeness and reduced use of negative politeness and bald-on-record strategies in superior-directed requests.

Table 4. Distribution of Politeness Strategies in Supportive Moves

Politeness strategy	KR		US	
	Peer	Superior	Peer	Superior
Bald on record	6	1	13	2
Positive politeness	130	177	187	116
Negative politeness	60	46	65	42
Off record	0	0	0	1
Total	196	224	265	161

Note. Statistical results for group comparisons are reported with Monte Carlo simulated p-values.
(1) Culture (US vs. KR): Peer, $\chi^2 = 2.76$, $p = .259$, $V = .077$; Superior, $\chi^2 = 4.01$, $p = .225$, $V = .10$
(2) Power (Peer vs. Superior): US, $\chi^2 = 5.59$, $p = .106$, $V = .12$; KR, $\chi^2 = 10.80$, $p = .003$**, $V = .16$ **$p < .01$.

At the sub-strategy level, give or ask for reasons (P13) was the most frequent supportive strategy across all four conditions. In the Korean data, P13 occurred frequently in both peer-directed (n = 54) and superior-directed requests (n = 98), with a stronger concentration in superior-directed emails. Other frequent strategies in Korean superior-directed requests included presuppose or assert common ground (P7, n = 18), go on record as incurring a debt (N10, n = 18), use in-group identity markers (P4, n = 18), offer or promise (P10, n = 15), give gifts to the hearer (P15, n = 15), and give deference (N5, n = 15). In the U.S. data, P13 was also frequent in both peer-directed (n = 54) and superior-directed requests (n = 68). Peer-directed U.S. emails showed relatively frequent use of use in-group identity markers (P4, n = 28), go on record as incurring a debt (N10, n = 26), and offer or promise (P10, n = 25), while superior-directed U.S. emails showed lower overall frequencies across several supportive sub-strategies (see Table 5). These patterns are illustrated in the following examples:

(1) Superior-KR: We are currently disagreeing with the PR team regarding the website schedule. (P13: Give or ask for reasons)
(2) Superior-KR: I believe we both want to ensure that the project is completed smoothly without causing issues for other departments. (P7: Presuppose/assert common ground)
(3) Superior-US: I'm asking because the client has requested the revised figures by tomorrow, and this will allow us to respond promptly. (P13: Give or ask for reasons)

Table 5. Distribution of Politeness Sub-Strategies in Supportive Moves

Sub-strategy	KR		US	
	Peer	Superior	Peer	Superior
B1 Emphasize urgency	0	0	1	0
B2 Emphasize efficiency	1	1	7	2
B3 Explicitly mark power asymmetry	5	0	5	0
N2 Question / hedge	10	8	6	6
N3 Be pessimistic	5	1	3	0
N4 Minimize imposition	9	1	16	3
N5 Give deference	4	15	2	7
N6 Apologize	17	3	12	1
N10 Go on record as incurring a debt	15	18	26	25
P1 Notice/attend to hearer	8	5	16	4
P2 Exaggerate interest/approval	6	0	12	0
P4 Use in-group identity markers	20	18	28	21
P6 Avoid disagreement	0	4	0	2
P7 Presuppose/assert common ground	10	18	19	9
P8 Joke	0	0	0	1
P9 Assert concern for hearer's wants	4	0	7	0
P10 Offer / promise	8	15	25	8
P11 Be optimistic	12	4	10	2
P12 Include both speaker and hearer	0	0	1	0
P13 Give or ask for reasons	54	98	54	68
P14 Assume or assert reciprocity	3	0	3	0
P15 Give gifts to H	5	15	12	1
O13 Over-generalize	0	0	0	1

The supportive move sub-strategy analysis showed a pattern distinct from that observed at the main strategy level (see Table 6). Cultural differences were not statistically significant in either peer-directed requests ($\chi^2 = 26.13$, $p = .111$, $V = .24$) or superior-directed requests ($\chi^2 = 24.49$, $p = .055$, $V = .25$). In contrast, power-related differences were highly significant in both the U.S. data ($\chi^2 = 75.68$, $p < .001$, $V = .42$) and the Korean data ($\chi^2 = 73.14$, $p < .001$, $V = .42$). These results indicate that supportive-move sub-strategies were more strongly shaped by power relations than by cultural background.

Table 6. Statistical Tests of Supportive Move Sub-Strategy Distributions

Comparison	χ^2	p	Cramer's V
Culture: Peer, US vs KR	26.13	0.111	0.24
Culture: Superior, US vs KR	24.49	0.055	0.25
Power: US, Peer vs Superior	75.68	< .001***	0.42
Power: KR, Peer vs Superior	73.14	< .001***	0.42

Note. Monte Carlo simulated p-values are reported. ***$p < .001$.

4.3 Subject Lines

In subject lines, bald-on-record strategies were the most frequent across all four conditions. In the Korean data, bald-on-record strategies accounted for most cases in both peer-directed ($n = 29$) and superior-directed subject lines ($n = 20$), followed by off-record strategies in superior-directed emails ($n = 7$) and limited use of negative politeness ($n = 2$). In the U.S. data, bald-on-record strategies likewise predominated in both peer-directed ($n = 25$) and superior-directed subject lines ($n = 26$), with limited use of off-record strategies in superior-directed emails ($n = 3$) and negative politeness ($n = 1$) (see Table 7).

Table 7. Distribution of Politeness Strategies in Subject Lines

Politeness strategy	KR		US	
	Peer	Superior	Peer	Superior
Bald on record	29	20	25	26
Positive politeness	0	1	1	0
Negative politeness	1	2	3	1
Off record	0	7	1	3
Total	30	30	30	30

Note. Statistical comparisons were not interpreted because subject-line strategies were highly concentrated in bald-on-record forms and several cells contained zero or very low frequencies.

At the sub-strategy level, emphasize efficiency (B2) was the most frequent strategy in both peer- and superior-directed subject lines across the two groups. Off-record strategies, specifically hints (O1), occurred only in superior-directed subject lines, with higher frequencies in the Korean data (n = 7) than in the U.S. data (n = 3) (see Table 8). Descriptively, the distributions show limited variation in subject-line strategies, with most cases concentrated in concise, task-oriented formulations, although hint-based subject lines appeared in some superior-directed emails. These patterns are illustrated in the following examples:

(1) Peer-KR: Presentation on Next Year's Marketing Plan (B2: Emphasize efficiency)
(2) Superior-US: Website Revision Timeline (B2: Emphasize efficiency)
(3) Superior-KR: Mr. Johnson (O1: Hints)

Table 8. Distribution of Politeness Sub-Strategies in Subject Lines

Sub-strategy	Peer-US	Peer-KR	Superior-US	Superior-KR
B1 Emphasize urgency	2	0	1	0
B2 Emphasize efficiency	23	29	25	20
N1 Be conventionally indirect	1	0	1	1
N4 Minimize imposition	0	0	0	1
N5 Give deference	1	1	0	0
N10 Go on record as incurring a debt	1	0	0	0
P4 Use in-group identity markers	0	0	0	1
P11 Be optimistic	1	0	0	0
O1 Hints	0	0	3	7
O15 Be incomplete, use ellipsis	1	0	0	0

Note. Statistical tests were not conducted due to the concentration of data in B2 and the presence of many zero or low-frequency cells.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how institutional power shapes the distribution of politeness strategies across subject lines, head acts, and supportive moves in business request emails written by Korean and U.S. professionals. Previous studies of request emails have often focused on request forms at the level of the head act (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, Jung and Lee 2025, Kim and Lee 2017), with less attention to how politeness is organized across the broader structure of the email. As summarized in Table 9, the findings show that power did not simply lead to greater indirectness in superior-directed requests. Across both groups, subject lines remained largely efficiency-oriented, and head acts did not become uniformly more mitigated under hierarchical conditions. Instead, the clearest effects of power appeared in how politeness was distributed across email units, especially in supportive moves, where

sub-strategy distributions differed significantly by power condition in both groups.

Although Korean and U.S. professionals showed similar tendencies at the level of main strategy types, statistically clearer differences emerged at the sub-strategy level. The statistically clearest Korean–U.S. contrast appeared in the head act, where sub-strategy distributions differed significantly by cultural background in both peer- and superior-directed requests. In supportive moves, however, cultural differences were not statistically significant; instead, supportive-move sub-strategies were more clearly shaped by power relations within both groups. These findings show that broader categories alone obscure important differences in how politeness is realized. Politeness in business request emails is shaped not only by strategy choice, but by how relational work is distributed across the discourse, especially in response to power relations within each group (Locher and Watts 2005, Spencer-Oatey 2008).

Table 9. Summary of Dominant Sub-Strategy Patterns across Email Units

Email unit	Korean professional	U.S. professional
Subject line	Predominantly B2 (Emphasize efficiency), with occasional O1 (Hints) in superior-directed emails	Predominantly B2 (Emphasize efficiency), with minimal variation across power conditions
Head act	Peer: mainly N1 (Be conventionally indirect), Superior: greater use of B2 (Emphasize efficiency)	Mainly N2 (Question/hedge) in both peer- and superior-directed requests
Supportive move	Predominantly P13 (Give or ask for reasons), with stronger relational and justificatory expansion in superior-directed emails	Predominantly P13 (Give or ask for reasons), with stronger supportive expansion in peer-directed emails

The findings support the continued usefulness of Brown and Levinson's taxonomy for cross-cultural comparison, especially at the sub-strategy level. At the same time, they show that the weightiness model needs to be applied as a context-sensitive account rather than as a scalar prediction of indirectness. Although previous studies have often interpreted weightiness in terms of increased indirectness in upward requests (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011), workplace and institutional research shows a more variable pattern: redressive strategies may take different forms depending on interactional conditions, and direct or efficiency-oriented requests may remain acceptable (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1996, Harris 2003, Holmes and Stubbe 2015, Zhu 2017). The present findings align with this view. In this study, power asymmetry did not consistently increase indirectness in the request itself. Its stronger effect appeared in supportive moves, where writers explained, justified, aligned, or softened the request around the head act.

The Korean and U.S. data showed group-level differences in how participants balanced efficiency and relational concerns under hierarchy. Although variation was observed within both groups, the analysis points to dominant tendencies in how participants organized politeness across email units. In the U.S. data, interpersonal concerns were more often managed within the request, while messages remained concise and task-oriented. This tendency is consistent with findings that overt displays of deference toward superiors may be viewed as unnecessary or insincere (Fragale et al. 2012). A similar point is made by Fukushima (2013), who suggests that considerate behavior in U.S. contexts may be perceived as intrusive or excessive. In the Korean data, hierarchical conditions were associated with a greater descriptive emphasis on maintaining relationships. Prior research shows that power asymmetry strongly shapes language use in Korean professional contexts (Kim and Lee 2017, Park and Jeon 2026). Korean professionals often realized relational work in surrounding parts of the message, such as explanation, contextualization, deference, and common-ground appeals, even when the head act itself remained task-focused. However, this pattern should be interpreted as a tendency in the dataset, not as a statistically confirmed cultural

difference, because supportive-move sub-strategy distributions did not differ significantly by cultural background. It may reflect a broader orientation toward maintaining harmony in hierarchical interaction (Lee 2012). Thus, the evidence for Korean–U.S. differentiation is strongest in the linguistic design of the head act, while supportive moves show stronger power-related adjustment within both groups. From a rapport management perspective, these patterns show how interpersonal relations can be managed through multiple discourse resources rather than a single strategy (Spencer-Oatey 2008).

The study makes several contributions to research on politeness in business communication. First, it highlights the importance of message organization for pragmatic competence in professional writing. Research has often treated politeness in request emails as a matter of indirect expressions or formulaic markers, but the present findings show that effective communication depends on more than individual forms. Writers must coordinate requests, explanations, and relational positioning across the email as a whole. Instruction in business communication may therefore benefit from focusing on message organization rather than isolated politeness expressions.

Second, the study shows the value of sub-strategy analysis within an established politeness framework. Sub-strategy analysis revealed differences across power relations and cultural contexts that were not visible at the main strategy level. This allows a more precise account of how politeness is realized in professional email communication.

Third, the study extends the unit of analysis beyond the request head act by treating business emails as structured discourse units. Examining subject lines, head acts, and supportive moves together shows how politeness is distributed across the message. This perspective provides a framework for analyzing how relational work is organized across professional writing.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be noted. First, the study design involved role-adjusted scenarios, not identical tasks across conditions. Because realistic workplace requests differ depending on the recipient's institutional role, peer- and superior-directed requests were elicited using functionally comparable but distinct scenarios. Perceived imposition was not independently measured, and some observed differences between conditions may therefore reflect variation in imposition level as well as hierarchy direction.

Second, the email DCT format allowed participants to plan and revise their messages, which reflects an important feature of workplace email writing. However, the task did not involve actual workplace consequences, time constraints, or ongoing interpersonal relationships. In addition, English proficiency, professional training, and familiarity with English business-writing conventions were not directly measured. These factors may have shaped how participants formulated requests and distributed mitigation across the message. In particular, the Korean participants' greater reliance on conventional indirectness and the U.S. participants' greater use of question/hedge forms may partly reflect differences in formulaic L2 repertoires or familiarity with English business-writing conventions, rather than cultural or organizational orientations alone.

Third, the cultural comparison should be interpreted with caution. Participants were grouped by national and professional background, but individual cultural orientations, organizational norms, company size, and generational differences were not directly measured. The findings therefore reflect patterns within the sampled groups.

Despite these limitations, the study shows that institutional power shapes business request emails by reorganizing the placement of politeness across the message. Future research could extend this approach by examining how recipients perceive and evaluate these different distributions of politeness, and whether discourse-level organization influences judgments of appropriateness or professionalism in workplace contexts.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Level: Tertiary

Appendix A. Politeness Strategy Coding Scheme (Brown and Levinson 1987)

1. Bald-on-record strategies
   - B1. Urgency
   - B2. Efficiency
   - B3. Power asymmetry
   - B4. Intimacy

2. Positive politeness strategies
   - P1. Notice, attend to H (H's interests, wants, needs, goods)
   - P2. Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)
   - P3. Intensify interest to H
   - P4. Use in-group identity markers
   - P5. Seek agreement
   - P6. Avoid disagreement
   - P7. Presuppose, raise, or assert common ground
   - P8. Joke
   - P9. Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants
   - P10. Offer or promise
   - P11. Be optimistic
   - P12. Include both S and H in the activity
   - P13. Give or ask for reasons
   - P14. Assume or assert reciprocity
   - P15. Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)

3. Negative politeness strategies
   - N1. Be conventionally indirect
   - N2. Question, hedge
   - N3. Be pessimistic
   - N4. Minimize the imposition
   - N5. Give deference
   - N6. Apologize
   - N7. Impersonalize S and H
   - N8. State the FTA as a general rule
   - N9. Nominalize
   - N10. Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H

4. Off-record strategies
   - O1. Give hints
   - O2. Give association clues
   - O3. Presuppose
   - O4. Understate
   - O5. Overstate
   - O6. Use tautologies
   - O7. Use contradictions
   - O8. Be ironic
   - O9. Use metaphor
   - O10. Use rhetorical questions
   - O11. Be ambiguous
   - O12. Be vague
   - O13. Over-generalize
   - O14. Displace H
   - O15. Be incomplete, use ellipsis

Appendix B. DCT Scenario

1. DCT scenario: Request email to a peer

[Situation: Requesting a peer to take over a time-sensitive presentation task]

You are a junior manager on the marketing team. You are scheduled to present next year's marketing plan to the Executive Department in three days. However, you have just realized that you have an important client meeting scheduled on the same day. Because the presentation was requested by a senior manager, it is your responsibility to ensure that the marketing plan is presented as scheduled. Due to your conflicting commitments, you need to ask a colleague to deliver the presentation on your behalf. You decide to contact Eric Stevens, who is a junior manager on your team and the same age as you. He has been with the company for about a year, but you have not yet had many opportunities to work closely or communicate with him.

2. DCT Scenario: Request email to a superior

[Situation: Requesting a superior to intervene and suggest solutions for an interdepartmental problem]

You are a junior manager on the marketing team. Yesterday, the Public Relations (PR) team requested that you develop a website for their department by next week. Despite making every effort to meet this deadline, you have determined that completing the project within the given timeframe is not feasible. You contacted the PR team to request an extension of the deadline; however, they continued to insist that the website be completed by next week. They described the project as a "simple" website and appeared not to fully recognize the scope of work involved. Brian Johnson, the head of your team, previously worked in the PR department and is known for handling interdepartmental issues effectively. Although you do not usually communicate with him directly on such matters, you decide to ask him to intervene by contacting the PR team and requesting a deadline extension on your behalf.

