

Contents

I. Introduction	4
0.1 Aims and objectives.....	6
II. Theoretical Part	7
1. Speech Acts.....	7
1.1 Indirect speech acts	9
2. The Concept of Politeness	10
2.1 Theories of Politeness	11
2.1.1 Conversational contract view.....	11
2.1.2 The social-norm view	12
2.1.3 The conversational-maxim view	12
2.1.4 The face-saving view	16
3. Cultural values related to English speaking countries	19
3.1 Hofstede's dimensions	19
3.2 Implications of individualism	20
4. Ritualization.....	22
4.1 Politeness strategies a la Brown and Levinson.....	23
4.1.1 Positive politeness strategies.....	23
4.1.2 Negative politeness strategies	25
4.1.3 Off-record strategies	27
5. Impression Management.....	29
6. The Genre: Cover Letters.....	31
6.1 Types of Cover Letters.....	31
6.2 Structure of Cover Letters.....	33
6.2.1 Salutations.....	33
6.2.2 Complimentary Close	34
6.2.3 The main body of the letter	34
6.3 Language of Cover Letters.....	35
III. Analysis	37
7.1 Introduction.....	37
7.2 Data	38
7.3 Sequencing of information.....	39
7.3.1 Justifying the goal	42
7.3.2 Relevancy with the position	48
7.3.3 Main body	53
7.3.4 Request.....	58
7.4 Sample letter	66
IV. Summary	71
V. Závěr	75
VI. Works Cited	78

I. Introduction

Communication in the most general sense is a necessary precondition for the cohesion of any society. Through its various levels and forms, interactants exchange meanings, choosing from the seemingly indefinite number of options the expressions conveying their purposes in the most appropriate way. Their choices are, however, limited – they need to consider the immediate context on one hand and the range of means at hand, the more global cultural context. It is obvious that simply the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar is not sufficient. To convey and interpret meanings fully requires also pragmatic sensitivity to implicit communicative messages.

Accordingly, the study of language in the past half a century started to be increasingly interdisciplinary, combining philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology and other social sciences. One of the traditional approaches is to view language as a symbolic tool, capable of “actively symboliz[ing] the social system, representing metaphorically in its patterns of variation the variation that characterizes human cultures” (Halliday, 1984: 3). It follows that language systematically reflects information about the society, its members, culture, values and the relationships among them. At the same time, as many sociological theories explain, language as one of the primary socialization means offers the prism through which its users perceive the world around them (see Berger and Luckmann: 1966; Parsons: 1967). Necessarily, all these aspects influence the choices resulting in unique preferences in the treatment of language.

The socio-pragmatic standpoint, which this thesis draws on, attempts to analyze not only what is being said but take into account how, when, by whom and to whom this is communicated. Over the years, one of the major themes in pragmatics turned out to be linguistic politeness – a concept connected with appropriate linguistic behaviour in specific social contexts aiming at easing the tensions arising from the interaction (Levinson, 1983: 12; van Dijk, 1997: 8). It is not easy to grasp as it is always connected with

unwritten cultural values and is therefore taken as a matter-of-fact for anyone from within the speech community. Politeness – or, more often the lack of it – becomes apparent whenever different cultural backgrounds clash in important aspects and their corresponding realizations in language because the participants are either not aware of the differences or had chosen not to act according to them.

The reception by the audience may then reveal that some things should better not be thematized at all, or it should be done in a completely different manner. For example, what can be perceived as inappropriate boasting in one culture is an expression of one's self-awareness. As such it is totally acceptable by its members but not necessarily by someone else. Or, while one culture permits direct request, other culture may use a variety of indirect tactics to do the same, etc. similar situations point to the existence of politeness as the preferred way of communication legitimate within a particular social system.

Possible clashes in understanding what is appropriate do not, however, occur only across languages but even across different sub-cultural backgrounds within the same language. Even within the same speech community, there are slightly different realizations of what is considered appropriate at the particular moment (see Drew and Heritage, 1992). The most apparent instances tend to be those that are 'problematic' in some way, i.e. those which may threaten the faces of the participants – be it self-presentation or making a request as in case of cover letters. As such, they call for treatment that would make them more acceptable. In other words, they require a degree of politeness professed through a more or less limited range of language strategies.

0.1 Aims and objectives

This thesis is an application of theoretical concepts of politeness (primarily the face-saving view designed by Brown and Levinson) and it attempts to trace the functional choices of those theoretical parameters in a particular text type – cover letters.

An important aspect of this analysis stems from the relative standardization of the genre, which is simultaneously open to creativity, reflecting the individuality of the writer. In case of cover letters, it could be argued that individualization is an important part of the message and one of the decisive moments in the addressee's evaluation process. All the while, there are aspect most of the letters share.

My main goal is to account for strategies used by native speakers of English when applying for a job. Using authentic material collected from two main sources – HR department of a university in the USA and various Czech language schools employing foreign lectors – I will analyze some of the politeness features, focusing on ritualization and specific politeness strategies used in this specific interaction in connection with their goal.

Although this study is not primarily comparative, I will be inherently using the viewpoint I could hardly ignore or pretend to be free of – my own Czech cultural background and my knowledge of Czech politeness strategies. I do not make any claims of objectivity as it is impossible to detach myself from the influences I have been socialized in. Also, I admit I am to a large extent limited by the fact that I am not a native speaker of English, which necessarily leaves many aspects of cover letters invisible to me. Nevertheless, I do hope, that what might be a handicap will from a different angle contribute to my seeing some aspects a native speaker may not be aware of due to reasons suggested above.

II. Theoretical Part

1. Speech Acts

In the broadest sense, speech acts are social acts realized by language. As such they are oriented towards the others and aim at communicating meanings. This is possible because both parties rely on “their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference” (Searle, 1985: 8) as the acts always take place as elements of larger structures. The ultimate criterion of success is whether the speaker is understood – that is, whether his or her intention is recognized in the way he or she had planned (Levinson, 1983: 226-230). There are, however, several aspects that may complicate the situation.

Firstly, the understanding of an utterance may be complicated by the fact that there is always some freedom of individual input within the socially prescribed. Coulmans understands creativity in language as the balance between the familiar and the novel controlled by pragmatic factors when the interactants consider the “interplay of grammatical rules, functional adequacy, situational appropriateness, stylistic preferences, and norms of use” (Coulmans, 1981: 6).

Further, the speech act theory is based on the notion that utterances tend to combine several levels of action: the act of saying something together with its determinate sense and reference (locution), the intention behind what is said (illocution), which may but does not need to be the same as the locution, and finally the effect the utterance has on the audience under specific circumstances (perlocution) (Levinson, 1983: 236). Since it is a fact that many social situations recur and so do the communicative goals, for the sake of economy standardized ways of reaching those goals have evolved in the form of speech acts (Kent and Harnish, 1979: 32, Tsui, 1994: 16).

Although the outcome of an utterance usually roughly falls within some of them, the final effect is often reached through a combination of several types of speech acts. Part of the message is also conveyed through their sequencing as well as their combination with other illocutionary acts or support of address terms or adjuncts to the head act as shown by Blum-Kulka (1984: 200).

In language, such economical behaviour is manifested in verbal routines, which are “prefabricated linguistic units in a well-known and generally accepted manner” developed as a result of limited and repeating range of communicative goals (Coulmans, 1981: 1). This means that typical situations require typical expressions.

General speech act theory presupposes “literal force hypothesis” which assumes that there is a connection between illocutionary force and sentence form. This basically means that the above mentioned acts are typically realized through typical verbs, sentence types, particles (such as ‘please’) or intonation. Gazard (in Levinson, 1983: 263) defines it as follows:

- (i) Explicit performatives have the force named by the performative verb in the matrix clause
- (ii) Otherwise, the three major sentence types in English, namely the imperative, interrogative and declarative have the forces traditionally associated with them namely ordering (pre-requesting), questioning and stating respectively (with, of course, the exception of explicit performatives which happen to be in declarative format)

If this hypothesis is true, it may be inferred that a sentence used in any other way than suggested in the above rules has some additional meaning. Its form, nevertheless, has to remain within some socially defined scope to be recognizable and use prescribed forms “which naturally tend to become conventionally polite ways” of communication (Searle, 1979: 49). Such cases

are described as indirect speech acts and have become one of the main topic of pragmatics.

1.1 Indirect speech acts

Indirectness seems like the more difficult road to take, as it is costly for the speaker and the addressee alike in terms of encoding and decoding the message. At the same time, they run the danger of misunderstanding, especially if they do not share the cultural background. Despite all this, indirectness has become an integral part of languages because it is motivated by a very important aspect of interaction – politeness.

To demonstrate this, let us take two examples of asking for money as quoted by Levinson (*ibid*, 1983: 274):

(109) Please lend me some cash.

(110) I don't suppose you would by any chance be able to
lend me some cash, would you?

Here, the difference between what is said and what is meant points to some additional meaning which has to be inferred through the pragmatic knowledge the participants (desirably) share because it has become conventionalized – acting according to the convention then shows that consideration for the other is taken into account.

Most utterances therefore simultaneously fulfill two functions at the same time: representational function, which conveys the contents of message on the surface level. The social function derives from the orientation towards the audience and is manifested through ways the speaker modifies the utterance so that it is made more acceptable for the hearer (House and Kasper, 1981: 158). To account for ways of deviating from direct representations of human intentions, various politeness theories have been designed. The following chapters will offer some explanations of the motivation for such behavior by providing a brief insight into some of the theories.

2. The Concept of Politeness

Since politeness is a word often mentioned in everyday conversation, one would assume that the meaning is clear: in the western world, as far as non-verbal interaction is concerned, being polite means opening the door for ladies or removing ones hat in a room. On the level of language, politeness means greeting others upon entering or uttering 'thank you' or 'excuse me' at the right moment. Politeness is in general understanding related to appropriate behaviour; the opposite would be considered rude and elicit negative reactions (see Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2004).

These notions of politeness are, however, only commonsense terms linked to etiquette and interactional rituals. They developed as a result of the need to control group aggression and prevent significant interactional conflicts. Standardized behaviour disarms this aggression because the rituals serve as ready-made tools, easing the uncertainty of most social contacts; they provide social control in the form of guidelines and boundaries for acceptable and mutually understandable behaviour (see Brown and Levinson, 1987; Coulmans, 1981; Parsons, 1967; Švehlová, 1994; Watts, 2004).

The same holds for pragmatic linguistic behaviour. Although the manifestations are also more of less arbitrary, both are concerned with the strategic use of language in order to achieve one's goals in a socially acceptable way and so prevent the potential threat. At the same time, the distribution of both types of politeness – who is polite to whom – is socially conditioned, reflecting more general values of a particular cultural environment (see Brown and Levinson, 1987; Watts, 2004; Wierzbicka, 1991).

An important question arises here as to what goals are followed. Are they altruistic – that is, does politeness pay attention to social equilibrium? Or are the goals egoistic and are only skilfully hidden behind a polished polite mask? Politeness may probably cover both ends of the scale as long as the manifestations are acknowledged as legitimate in a particular society (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 47). But it is beyond the aims of linguistics to decide

about the psychological moves of the interactants. Instead, it focuses on its linguistic realizations and explores what makes some uses of language more appropriate than others and in what contexts.

Pragmatics and sociolinguistics have focused on politeness for over three decades. Stemming from the complexity of any social phenomenon, different kinds of theoretical models of politeness have been developed over the years. Due to this complexity, it is very difficult to give an exhausting and universal definition of what politeness is. Most researchers so far have made various assumptions about the functions of linguistic politeness, reflecting the inter-disciplinary overlap. At the same time, these theories complement and combine different aspects of one another offering still new angles from which politeness can be studied. Drawing from Fraser's (1990) categorization, the following chapters attempt to give a basic overview of the most influential frameworks of the politeness phenomenon.

2.1 Theories of Politeness

Fraser categorizes the politeness canon into the following: the "conversational contract" view, the "social norm" view, the "conversational-maxim" view and the "face-saving" view, briefly explained below.

2.1.1 Conversational contract view

Represented by Fraser and Nolen, this view is based on their belief that each conversational participant enters the encounter with a set of rights and obligations that determine their behaviour. Like most theories based on symbolic interaction, the rules are open to change and redefinition so as to be always relevant in the context. The participants only need to close another "conversational contract" (Fraser, 1990: 221). Politeness in this view "[...] simply involves getting on with the task at hand in light of the terms and conditions of the conversational contract" (ibid: 223).

In such a quickly changing environment, politeness is never an intrinsic feature of utterances. Instead, what is polite is redefined over and over again for every single utterance. Similar views are especially useful for cross-cultural analyses as they support the importance of unique understanding of cultural contexts (see Eelen, 2004).

2.1.2 The social-norm view

Since “social norms are bound to affect the relevant linguistic system from the outside and thus leave behind traces in its lexicon and grammar”, this approach associates politeness with speech style (Held in Watts, 2004: 136). Here, language is deeply affected by the social norms and corresponding rules as prescriptions for behaviour expected in particular contexts. Actions labeled as appropriate are polite, variants that do not fit the rule are impolite and rude. The degree of imposition is, however, always scalar and very situation-specific as proved by now classical Garfinkel’s 1970s experiments with students and their families: formal behaviour in situations where it is not expected is perceived not as more but less polite and even disrespectful or arrogant (Fraser, 1990: 225).

Again, this notion may be especially useful in cross-cultural research – norms do vary across cultures. At the same time, even within a particular culture, the norms determine what can be thematized and how. But since the rules cannot be as explicit as to cover each particular conversation it means that there is always something that is prescribed and something which is left up to the user.

2.1.3 The conversational-maxim view

Grice argues that people involved in a conversation are rational individuals who cooperate only in order to reach their goals. To do so by means of language, they should communicate the message as effectively as possible – “such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange” (qtf. Levinson, 1983: 101). In other

words, to produce meaningful messages they need to understand each other in particular situation using the most appropriate resources. Grice formulated this in the Cooperative Principle (CP), specified in a set of maxims and sub-maxims that represent universal principles of language use (Grice, adapted from Leech, 1975: 8).

- 1) QUANTITY: give the right amount of information
 - Make your contribution as informative as is required.
 - Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

- 2) QUALITY: try to make your contribution one that is true
 - Do not say what you believe to be false.
 - Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

- 3) RELATION: be relevant [in terms of means-ends analysis]

- 4) MANNER: be perspicuous
 - Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - Avoid ambiguity.
 - Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 - Be orderly.

Obviously, not all the maxims are always observed in communication. In fact, as a part of shared knowledge, they are more of underlying assumptions that give each communication a structure. Measured against it, new meanings may be inferred if the maxims are not observed because flouting them triggers special interpretative processes that uncover the implicatures in the conversation. The basic assumption may then read “no deviation from rational efficiency without a reason” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 58). It is these mechanisms that are involved in all indirect speech acts.

Inspired by Grice's CP, **Lakoff** develops the maxims in new directions by bringing the notion of well-formedness to pragmatics. Her main contribution lies in her move from efficient delivery of information to broader social context and interactants as complex individuals in social network. Instead, Lakoff defines politeness as "a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange" (Eelen 2001: 2). Her view of politeness therefore accounts also for social relations, focusing on the avoidance of offence to other.

Of interest of special interest are three of them (with varying cultural emphasis on each). Respectively, they are: Distance – strategy of impersonality, prevailing in European cultures, Deference – strategy of hesitancy, important especially in Asian cultures and Camaraderie – strategy of informality, demonstrated especially in modern America (Eelen, 2001: 3).

Complementing Grice's PP by postulating Politeness Principle (PP), also **Leech** stresses not only purely illocutionary goals of conversation but also its social aspects. It is politeness that "rescues the CP from serious trouble"... because it serves as "strategic conflict avoidance" (1983: 80). As such, it explains why people sometimes deliberately flout the maxims and fail to be informative – they do so in order to maintain friendly relations and social balance and provide the basis for any further communication (ibid: 79-84).

Analogically to Grice's conversational maxims, Leech introduces a set of politeness maxims. Each takes into account the 'self' and the 'other' and at the same time expresses two ends of a "cost/benefit scale" – "the scale which specifies how much the act referred to in the propositional content of the speech act is judged to cost or benefit the speaker or the addressee" (House and Kasper, 1981: 158). The maxims are as follows:

Figure: 2-1. Politeness Maxims (adapted from Leech: 1983, 131-2)

1. TACT MAXIM	a) minimize cost to other
	b) maximize benefit to other
2. GENEROSITY MAXIM	a) minimize benefit to self
	b) maximize cost to self
3. APPROBATION MAXIM	a) minimize dispraise of other
	b) maximize praise of other
4. MODESTY MAXIM	a) minimize praise of self
	b) maximize dispraise of self
5. AGREEMENT MAXIM	a) minimize disagreement between self and other
	b) maximize agreement between self and other
6. SYMPATHY MAXIM	a) minimize antipathy between self and other
	b) maximize sympathy between self and other

According to Leech, to maintain social equilibrium consideration for 'other' is more important than for the 'self'. For this reason, the Tact and Approbation maxims should be paid most attention to. Likewise, avoiding imposition is a weightier factor than maximizing the positive attitudes (ibid: 133). As Leech himself admits, however, the importance given to each maxim and the relationship between the CP and PP maxims varies among cultures and he does not make any claims for their universality (ibid: 80).

At the same time, Leech introduces the "optionality scale", representing the degree to which the linguistic choice depends on the participants or is subject to the maxims. In terms of this theory, the lower the imposition and higher the benefit to the addressee combined with a high factor of optionality, the more polite the speech act is. What is therefore considered as polite and tactful is manifested through indirectness in speech (House and Kasper: 158).

2.1.4 The face-saving view

So far, the most influential framework for the treatment of linguistic politeness has been designed by **Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson**. Their theory, drawing on predecessors including the above mentioned, centers around Goffman's concept of face which is

“the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact [...] an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself” (Goffman, 1967: 5).

Touching upon one's identity and self-esteem, face is extremely valuable. However, due to the dynamism of human interaction, it is also highly vulnerable; it can be enhanced in many ways but also lost easily (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 59).

Again, following Goffman's observation that “the person will have two points of view – a defensive orientation toward saving his own face and a protective orientation toward saving the other's face” (Goffman in House and Kasper, 1981: 155), the authors distinguish two related types of face, attributed by interactants to one another: the **negative face**, or the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions and the **positive face**, or the desire to be approved (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 13). Many interactions thus represent an inherent threat to hearer's/speaker's face-wants as they run contrary to those face needs. But since both parties are aware of how sensitive the face is, they are mutually motivated to maintain both through defensive/ego-oriented and protective/alter-oriented means – in other words, politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61, House and Kasper, 1981: 155).

To minimize the conflicts potentially arising from the face-threatening acts (FTAs), Brown and Levinson identify several politeness strategies for

performing speech acts in a less imposing way, ranging from complete avoidance of the FTA to performing it in a manner seemingly without connection to the speech act.

Figure: 2-2. Possible strategies for doing FTAs (adapted from Brown and Levinson, 1987: 69)

Do the FTA	On record	Without redressive action, baldly (1)	
		With redressive action	Positive politeness (2)
	Negative politeness (3)		
	Off record (4)		
Do not do the FTA (5)			

If the participants decide for the FTA, it may be done in two basic ways: first, 'on record', implying only one communicative intention and making the message clear to all participants. Second, 'off record', where what is being said may be interpreted ambiguously because the speaker wants to avoid direct imposition through not mentioning the obvious. But precisely this fact is what draws the attention and triggers the implied meaning. The 'on record' statements can be further professed baldly (i. e. without mitigating devices) so as to be effective in the sense of Gricean Maxim of Cooperation. On the other hand, performing action redressively, employing positive or negative politeness strategies, shows consideration for the positive and negative face respectively. Sometimes, impersonalization through the use of passive, an apology for transgression or, reversely, stressing closeness and common ground, may soften the potential face-threat (ibid: 68-70).

The kind and amount of politeness is determined by the type of speech act and the circumstances in which it takes place. In realizing it, speakers need to take into account at least three social variables: the relative power between the hearer and the speaker, their social distance and the perceived ranking of the imposition caused by the speech act (ibid: 15). With all this in mind, the speaker is able to rationally estimate the potential threat and the risk he or she is about to run by deciding for particular strategy. Generally, the more dangerous the potential FTA, the higher probability there is for choosing a higher numbered strategy in the scheme suggested above (ibid: 73).

To perform socially acceptable behaviour thus requires much cultural sensitivity and awareness. According to Brown and Levinson, the above mentioned strategies and processes are universal across the world as the notion of face and rational choices among the strategies for its protection are central to all languages. They do admit, however, that their realizations differ greatly as the H-S relationship and the potential offensiveness of the message need always to be measured against culturally specific values.

For the same reason, as Sifianou (Sifianou, 1992: 8) verifies in her application of Brown and Levinson's theoretical work, there is no support for the view that one nation is more polite than another – they only have different means for its expression and also different values attached to it. As to what they are in the English speaking environment will be dealt with in the next chapter.

3. Cultural values related to English speaking countries

The following chapters explore some aspects of the English speaking culture in more detail, although it remains clear that any such description is limiting and simplifying; particular feature becomes relevant only on the grounds of comparison with the features of some other culture, where visible become those features that differ. It follows that different comparisons generate different outcomes. Although this study is not primarily comparative, the following chapters point to important social dimensions and values present in the culture and reflected in the politeness strategies employed.

3.1 Hofstede's dimensions

The sociologist Hofstede reached very similar conclusions like Brown and Levinson, when he identified power and social distance as two of five main social factors influencing human interaction. His research proved that applying these variables on particular cultures shows significant differences among them, pointing to varying hierarchies of values in the societies (Hofstede, 1980: 16).

Social distance indicates the closeness (or, solidarity) between participants. Its degree divides cultures roughly into predominantly collectivistic¹ or individualistic. Individualism, mostly found in what is considered the 'western world' in this sense means relatively loose ties between individuals, stressing the personal autonomy of each member as more important than his/her being part of a larger group. (Hofstede, 1991: 51; Foley, 1997: 265). Interestingly, the countries occupying the top three places are all English speaking countries (<http://www.geert-hofstede.com>).

¹ Following the presupposition that particular features only become obvious in comparisons, it is useful to note that this particular binary opposition comes from the frequent comparison of the Western and the Far east cultural traditions – especially Japan and China. Taking these differences into account may reveal how inappropriate the theories of politeness designed in the West are for cultures based on other principles (see Gu, 1990; Watts, 1992). The differences in its manifestations may be quite astonishing and exactly opposite results may be reached by the same behaviour (for more, see, Shield, 2006, Xinke, 2006).

As a vertical dimension, **power distance** concerns social hierarchy, forming various relationships between those who hold the power and those who are affected by it. The degree of distance is perceived as the legitimacy of the hierarchical setup in the most important social institutions. Again, the research reveals that most English speaking countries rank world's lowest in this dimension, tending more to equality than subordination among societal levels (Hofstede, 1991: 52-3).

It should be stressed, that the collectivist-individualist dichotomy is only one of the possible approaches, which happens to match the social reality in scientific research. It has been designed as a tool to grasp the problem more easily. A fact remains that values are reflected in norms which influence the expression and degree of explicitness in specific contexts. This means that the same culture may be explicit in some and implicit in some other situations without any claims of superiority of one over another.

3.2 Implications of individualism

The above findings are further supported by Wierzbicka's claims that the Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition is generally one which puts

special emphasis on the rights and autonomy of each individual, which abhors interference in other people's business, [...] which is tolerant of individual idiosyncrasies and peculiarities, which respects everyone's privacy, which approves of compromises and disapproves of dogmatism of any kind (Wierzbicka, 1991: 30).

The central importance of **privacy** and **equality** seem to be crucial to the interpretation of politeness strategies in English – not to impose or interfere with others' precious private space calls for much more elaborate strategies to minimize the threat. At the same time, the equality between members allows for a degree of **self-assertion** (yet, boasting is inappropriate), legitimately

manifested in relatively clear voicing of their **wants and wishes** (ibid: 72). Obviously, these two principles tend to clash and it is a question of a very careful weighing of words that express the right amount of both values. In English, this is to a certain extent compensated for example the generally **friendly attitude** to everyone, including strangers, that could be summarized as 'I want everyone to feel something good' (ibid: 86-7). Drawing on the face-saving view of politeness used as our framework, it becomes clear that such values generate a variety of specific negative and positive politeness strategies for FTA redress.

From the preceding chapters it follows that the structure of utterances is not arbitrary, reflecting larger social structures. The universal phenomenon of politeness is then shaped by specific cultural values and further by particular context and pragmatic concerns.

4. Ritualization

Generally speaking, rituals are standardized ways of how to do something, taking away part of the burden of repeatedly having to think up new solutions. As such, they partially reduce the tension stemming from the uncertainty and unpredictability of social contact – they provide safe guidelines while leaving space for interaction in the specific context. Since they are shared, they also act as meaningful symbols, telling the interactants what social roles to take while still providing them with a degree of tolerance in the choices they make.

From the point of view of macro-organization, rituals appear as plans – global patterns hierarchically ordered as component, preparatory or auxiliary and together “leading up to an intended goal” (Tárnyiková, 2002: 59). Together with scripts – “plans specifying roles of participants and their expected actions” (ibid: 59) – they are essential because we cannot plan actions containing larger number of moves too far in advance. In more routinized cases, such as some parts of conversations or letter-writing, certain expressions are so lexicalized and grammaticalized in the specific context that they “encode certain language-specific interactional meanings“ (van Dijk, 1997: 234; Wierzbicka, 1991: 31) simply by their presence or absence.

Besides acts of what might be called social ‘decorations’ or social ‘wrapping’ (greetings, identification, etc.), Van Dijk (ibid: 240) identifies the steps a proper request is made of:

1. establishing a necessary condition;
2. motivating the request;
3. stating a condition;
4. request-proposition;
5. statement of intentions with respect to the object as repeated motivation.

The patternings, together with language realization conform to the desired goal. Among others, this includes observance of the rules of politeness further specified in various strategies.

4.1 Politeness strategies a la Brown and Levinson

What follows is an overview of strategies typically employed in the cover letters as a result of our analysis. While this thesis uses mainly the framework offered by Brown and Levinson, it also draws on studies carried out by other researchers. Needless to say, that their conclusions are very analogical, often only using different terminology or analytical categories².

4.1.1 Positive politeness strategies

Positive politeness is the heart of friendly behavior, aiming at finding what is common to both sides, drawing them nearer (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 102-129).

I. Claim common ground

Strategy 1: Notice, attend to H (his interest, wants, needs, goods) – suggests that S should pay attention to anything he or she thinks the H would want to be noticed and approved of.

Strategy 2: Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)

Strategy 5: Seek agreement - focuses on ways increasing agreement with H (choice of topics, etc.) and so satisfying his “desire to be ‘right’” (ibid: 120)

² For example a range of ‘downgraders’, ‘upgraders’ or ‘point of view operation’ (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984: 201-205; House and Kasper, 19???: 166-170).

Strategy 6: Avoid disagreement – complements the preceding strategy in suggesting vagueness about one’s own opinions. Common means to achieve this are hedges which “modify the membership to partial or true only under certain circumstances or”... “more true and complete than perhaps might be expected” (ibid: 146). Frequent expressions used to hedge might be *think, hope, you know* etc.

Strategy 7: Presuppose/raise/assert common ground – often reached through ‘point-of-view’ operations relating the participants in such a way as to reduce the distance between them.

II. Convey that S and H are cooperators – cooperatively involved in relevant activity

Strategy 9: Assert or presuppose S’s knowledge of and concern for H’s wants

Strategy 11: Be optimistic – optimism in this strategy is based on the presupposition of the S that the H will cooperate, mostly on the grounds of their mutually shared interest

Strategy 13: Give (or ask for) reasons - another way to involve the H in the cooperative activity is to bring about arguments that led to the conclusion and present it in a way assuming cooperation

III. Fulfill H’s want for some X

Strategy 15: Give gift to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation) – even a mention of H’s possible needs and a symbolical attending to them may create a feeling of satisfying the positive-face wants and so anticipating for example the H’s desire to learn more information as in *Do not hesitate to call me any time* and at the same time

offering help in that respect implies cooperation although it is actually for the S's benefit.

4.1.2 Negative politeness strategies

Negative politeness is meant to redress the imposition caused by potentially threatening the H's freedom of action. Minimizing the imposition through various distancing strategies is what is meant by paying respect in western society (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 129-211).

I. Be direct

Strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect – this strategy operates with the illocutionary force of indirect speech acts (e.g. using questions as requests), which has, however, through typical structures become so conventionalized that it can be unambiguously accepted as on record.

II. Don't presume/assume – this sub-rule warns against believing that anything connected with the FTA is believed or wanted by the H

Strategy 2: Question, hedge - as the name suggests, this strategy is supposed to hide or soften the utterance through modification of its "membership... to *partial*, or true only in certain respects, or... *more* true and complete than perhaps might be expected" (ibid: 145). Some of them are so conventionalized that it is difficult to identify the hedge still as a hedge.

Used especially in connection with the S's opinions and assumption, hedges may affect the illocutionary force of the performatives avoiding commitment to them and making 'minimal assumptions about H's wants' (eg. adverbs, tenses); or be encoded in if-clauses or particles such as question tags. Another possibility is to employ quality hedges like *I think*,

or structures doubting the assumption that the information would bring anything new to the H – *As you know... etc.*)

III. Don't coerce H

Strategy 3: Be pessimistic – utterances employing this strategy are formulated in a way that doubts the outcome in advance. They make use of negatives, subjunctives and various remote-possibility markers as in *I don't imagine there'd be any chance of you...* (ibid: 174)

IV. Communicate S's want to not impinge on H – communicate a reluctance on the part of S to impose on H.

Strategy 7: Impersonalize S and H – a frequently used approach that softens the FTA through shifting at least partially the responsibility from the S as the agent and the H as the addressee. This is most visibly manifested through the avoidance of the pronouns 'I' and/or 'you'. Traditionally, English hides the agent through passivization. In business letters, it is not uncommon to use the business 'we' or analogically the second person plural 'you' hidden behind the office or entire corporation as the addressee.

V. Redress other wants of H's

Strategy 10: Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H – to minimize the imposition the S explicitly thematizes the issue of debt – indebting him or herself but definitely removing it from the H. The most vivid example of this strategy is thanking.

4.1.3 Off-record strategies³

Communicating off-record provides the S with a safe way out since the utterance only triggers the notions and may therefore be explained in more than one way, removing part of the responsibility. The informational 'gaps' which are created tend to be 'filled' following the Gricean Maxims and drawing from context. In a sense it is a risky way of communicating as the S relies on the interpretative powers of the H. On the other hand, precisely this uncertainty is what reduces the FTA – it gives the H options in interpreting the message. Needless to say, that the mutual awareness of face sensitivity generally yield interpretations favorable for the S.

I. Violate Relevance Maxim

Strategy 1: Give hints

Strategy 2: Give association clues – both these strategies are based on the principle that missing or only partially relevant information (mentioning conditions or motives for doing something) signals some additional meanings that need to be decoded.

II. Violate Quantity Maxim

Strategy 4: Understate

Strategy 5: Overstate – both strategies are based on conveying less or more than is required in the particular situation.

³ Interestingly, none of the letters contain any of the implications triggered through metaphors, contradictions or irony suggested by the strategy 'violate the quality maxims'. It could be ascribed to the fact that such a formal contact, moreover the very first one, is not an occasion for deliberate inaccuracy. Since most of the information between the participants is not shared as yet, it would be dangerous to distort the little there is.

IV. Violate the Manner Maxim

Strategy 12: Be vague - the threat may be minimized through being vague in determining either the object or the offence involved.

Strategy 13: Over-generalize – another possibility is to make a general statement. Here, the H has a choice to interpret it in relation to him or her self.

Strategy 14: Displace H - similarly to the impersonalizing negative politeness strategy, this approach avoids direct mention of the H in connection with the FTA. Sometimes going into great length in explaining the situation, the S actually drops hints pointing to the relatedness.

5. Impression Management

According to some sociological theories, any contact is marked by role-play and constant attempts to harmonize the personal and the social. Impression management (IM) refers to “conscious or unconscious attempts to control the images that are projected in [...] social interactions” (Schlenker, 1980: 6). In other words, it is behaviour aiming at influencing the target person’s perception of a situation or, as in the case of cover letters, of the person writing the letter.

Apart from the individual’s ability of self-monitoring and acting accordingly, the next most important factor is the subjective perception of likelihood with which the goal can be achieved. The IM tactics tend to be more intentional when people believe they will be successful through creating certain impression in others (Higgins, 2004: 625; Stevens, 1995: 588). It is very likely that such a highly conventionalized situation as asking for an opportunity to come to a job interview through a cover letter will elicit some very specific IM tactics.

Following Schneider’s classification of **IM behavior**⁴, it is mainly the **verbal tactics** that are employable in this genre, falling into two further categories:

1. **assertive IM tactics**, which involve proactive image construction and
2. **defensive IM tactics**, representing reactive image repair (Tadeschi&Melburg in Stevens, 1995: 588).

Assertive IM tactics usually take the form of ingratiation or self-promotion.

Ingratiation tactics are meant to evoke interpersonal liking. This is most often achieved by means of **other-enhancement** or **opinion conformity**,

⁴ a) verbal statements, b) non-verbal or expressive behavior, c) modifications of one’s physical appearance, and d) integrated behavior patterns, involving favor rendering etc. (Schneider in Stevens, 1995: 588).

operating on the principle of reciprocal attraction. This phenomenon is based on the tendency to be attracted to those who seem to share similar beliefs and attitudes toward important values. Or, in working environment, those who seem to possess qualities compatible with an organization he or she opts for (which is, however, always biased by the personal characteristics of the recruiters). As such, this is a socio-psychological explanation of the positive politeness strategies.

Self-promotion tactics entail positive statements describing one's past accomplishments and future plans and are aimed at eliciting attributions such as competence and respect. They rely mainly on descriptions of overcoming obstacles, claiming responsibility for positive events, or making such event positive or, in some cases, more positive than it initially appears (Stevens, 1995: 588-9). Moreover, research proved that the ratio of these tactics is based especially on the type of position being filled – some require more erudition and results, some stress various soft skills or call for personality compatible with the rest of the team (Higgins, 2004, 630).

Defensive IM tactics help to offset negative attributions that could have come up in the course of the presentation. They may involve excuses, or explanations that shift the responsibility from the individual to some other cause, or justification of what has happened (Stevens: 589). These tactics do not, however, seem to be employed in non-dialogic structures very frequently as defense could draw undesired attention and so point to aspects that are in some way sensitive. In a cover letter, the applicant may choose what to thematize.

The final impression results from the just evaluation of the situation and effective combination of these tactics, their timing and word choice. The opposite could significantly influence the outcome.

6. The Genre: Cover Letters

Inferring from various sources on how to compose an impressive cover letter, it seems that writing it is an art. As many other business letters, it is to a large extent standardized and it has many specific 'do's' and 'don'ts'. At the same time, each applicant for a position wants to be unique enough to be noticed and, eventually, invited for an interview. Cover letter is a chance to make a good first impression, complementing (yet not summarizing) the resume. It is not inaccurate to understand cover letter as a personal advertisement, the writer's marketing tool on the employment market where good positions are scarce. But so are good candidates. One of the ways how to get the limited resource in the competition of others is the cover letter they write.

Contrary to the claims of most internet pages, cover letters are not the first thing recruiters or prospective employers read. Time is costly and therefore it is usually the educational and experiential part of a resume their attention is aimed at to make the pre-selection as effective as possible. Only if they consider the profile suitable enough, they turn from facts to the more individualized part of the first contact – the cover letter. The more important it is to maintain their interest by providing a consistent picture and to convince them the writer is worth further consideration.

6.1 Types of Cover Letters

(From: <http://www.careerone.com.au/jobs/job-search/get-that-job/improve-your-cover-letter>,
http://www.cdm.uwaterloo.ca/step4_3_1.asp, <http://www.collegegrad.com/jobsearch/Best-College-Cover-Letters/The-Reality-of-Cover-Letters/>.)

There are many possible circumstances calling for the need to search for a job and initially present oneself by a resume and an accompanying letter. Cover letters generally fall into one of two categories:

- Letter of application/cover letter — applying for an advertised opening and thus only reacting to the positions on the visible” job market.
- Letter of inquiry/broadcast letter — asking about the possibility of an opening on the “hidden” job market and aiming to uncover opportunities in organizations.

While cover letters draw most necessary information from the advertisement they apply for and do not need to explain reasons, to write a broadcast letter requires more research about the position, the addressee and generally require more consideration of how to approach particular position. At the same time, such applicant should be more assertive and active in taking further steps – such as mentioning in the letter (and then really carry out) a follow-up call to inquire about the recruiting process.

Formally, however, they are very similar. In both cases, the letter should focus on the strengths. Moreover, these should be highlighted in such a way that a connection can be made between what the writer has to offer and what the employer is looking for in terms of individual’s competencies but also values and/or personality traits (Higgins, 2004: 624). In other words, it should not only be about the applicant’s but primarily about the company’s needs. Also, if possible, both types of letters should give proofs of the writer’s assessment by mentioning specific successes and outcomes.

There does not seem to be any guaranteed prescription of how to write the most effective cover letter. The result always depends on the unique context. If certain components multiply, however, the chance of effectiveness increases.

6.2 Structure of Cover Letters

Being a type of business letter, a prototypical cover letter should match certain requirements concerning the contents and layout. The scope of this thesis does not allow for detailed analysis of parameters such as address, date or the format and layout, although they may also reflect the writer and contribute to the overall impression and reception of the letter. There is, however, very little to analyze in terms of linguistic politeness. Our focus will therefore be in the parts of the letter which show more individualized contents.

6.2.1 Salutations

English salutations have a fixed form. The most desirable form consists of the *Dear*-formula, followed by either Mr./Mrs. + first name and/or surname, or title + and/or surname, or even name + surname. Another possibility is to combine *Dear* + job title, such as '*manager*' or '*president*' (Shieldová, 2007: 86-7; Seglin, 1995: 63).

In case the name and/or gender of the addressee are unknown the 'Dear Sir or Madam' or 'Ladies and Gentlemen' are used. According to some sources a salutation to avoid is the empty '*to whom it concerns*' (Deckin, 1977: 162; Rees, 1994: 40-5), yet it is still frequently used. Needless to say that it is not always clear who should the recipient be, especially with inquiry letters, and it is not always equally easy to find this information out as some companies wish their hierarchy to remain a secret from the outside. But for the pragmatic reasons mentioned above it is advisable to make the effort and find out as much as possible not only about the recipient but also about the company – to show interest and at the same time to be able to aim the cover letter in the most effective way.

6.2.2 Complimentary Close

According to letter-writing manuals, the preferred complimentary close for business letters is simply *Sincerely*. Very frequent are also forms such as *Yours truly*, *Sincerely yours* or *Cordially*. All of them are less formal but still widely used in general correspondence. As too informal would for a business letter be considered expression like *As ever*, or *Best/Kindest/Warmest regards*. On the other hand, formulas such as *Respectfully yours*, or simply *Respectfully* are considered highly formal (Baugh, 1995: 72).

6.2.3 The main body of the letter

While the necessary greeting rituals at the beginning and end that constitute the genre are to a large extent standardized and their choice limited, the main body of the letter expresses the message in rather individual way, while still obeying pragmatic rules. When composing them, the author should think to the answers to several basic questions (Baugh, 1995: 49; Seglin, 1995: 9; Geffner, 1998: 28):

- What is the purpose of this letter? Why am I writing it?
- Who is the audience? Whom do I want to influence? What will motivate them to react favorably to my letter?
- What do I want to say? What is the scope of my subject? What is the reader's viewpoint on issues I am addressing?
- What result or action do I want?

The answers should then appear in the three constitutive parts: opening, body and closing of the letter. **The opening** should give reasons why the letter is written and state its purpose. Since this may decide whether the reader will continue reading, approaching it in some creative way can catch the reader's attention. It is advised to introduce the "you" into the letter at this

point by referring to some need or interest of the reader to make it more desirable for him or her.

The next paragraph – **body of the letter** – explains writer’s offer for fulfilling those needs or interest. By referring to relevant past experience, achievements and claimed personality traits it states what added value he or she could have for the prospective employer. Here, the “I” is introduced making a logical link to the “you”.

The end should summarize the letter and always suggest further action to be taken or idea that the writer wants the reader to consider, so that the expected result is made clear. Concerning the focus, both “you” and “I” should be mentioned with special emphasis on the “you’s” gains (Baugh: 1995, 22; Seglin, 1995: 18; http://www.myfuture.com/toolbox/coverletter_all.html#byw). Together with the opening lines, this is the most demanding part, as it threatens the reader by requesting an action from him or her.

6.3 Language of Cover Letters

Perhaps even more important than the adherence to some expected structure and sequencing of information (although designed with respect to psychological principles) is the language used. Generally speaking, there is no special language for such occasion. The basic rule is to provide **clear, brief and accurate** information produced as easily as natural conversation, reflecting the respect to the recipient, his abilities and time (Seglin, 1995, 26).

A positive effect is more likely to be reached if in combination with the choice of appropriate **tone**. Seglin suggests what attitude to take before writing any kind of letter:

... most [people] are reasonable, civilized, thoughtful, and friendly. All have an ego, which means they like to be treated as though they have a better-than-average intelligence and are important (ibid: 28).

For a situation in which one is requesting something, yet wanting to remain an equal and valuable individual, the most appropriate tone is a **friendly and personal** one, which however remains **courteous** (ibid: 28). In cover letters, part of the request is also its support through effective self-presentation arguments. Concerning language, this should according to the manuals be reached especially by 'action verbs', pointing to achievements and abilities of the applicant (Poe, 1994: 18; Smith, 2002: 29). Even this, however, must be done very sensitively in order not to endanger the addressee.

The adherence to the standard depends on several factors, the most significant being the degree of formality appropriate for the position and communicative channel (e.g. e-mails versus hard copy letters). All this, however, is in the end subject to the understanding of each particular applicant, his or her creativity and the consciousness of the deviation from the norm. Moreover, the sensitivity with which the applicants estimate the level may be part of the test of their general fitness for a job, including interpersonal skills demonstrated through the attitude to politeness. Identifying some of the means of reaching these effects through language is the purpose of this thesis.

III. Analysis

7.1 Introduction

A cover letter consists of several parts which put together convey the message of the author being interested in being invited to the first interview and eventually obtaining the job. The letter is the first step taken in this process. There, it should be clearly expressed what he or she wants to happen and support this information with relevant arguments why the addressee should want to see him or her. Although there are a number of sub-speech acts present in this genre, on the whole it is performing the speech act of requesting.

From the nature of this complex speech act, it is intrinsically threatening to the addressee in that it influences his or her freedom of action by proposing to do something the speaker/writer wishes. For that reason requests must be professed carefully, taking into account social variables (Tsui, 1994: 90; House and Kasper, 1981: 200). This means that the face of the addressee must be paid appropriate attention. In case of cover letters it is equally important that the applicant presents him or herself favorably and fully competent for the job as there is usually a fierce competition. Concerns for the addressee's face should, however, prevent the author from expressions bordering on boasting.

To form an acceptable cover letter therefore means to do it pragmatically politely – that is to include all necessary parts required by the particular culture for a given speech act and genre and at the same time express the proper reverence to the faces of both parties through positive and/or negative politeness strategies.

7.2 Data

The body of data gathered for the purpose of this thesis comes from several sources. One is the HR Department of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks which mainly between the years 2005 and 2007 advertised several positions from the field of accounting and administration. When references are made to this source they are called the 'Alaskan letters'. The second group of letters originates from various language schools in the Czech Republic, contacted by native speakers pursuing a teaching position – be it on the grounds of an advertisement, recommendation or sent spontaneously.

Altogether, there were over two hundred-and-fifty of them in the beginning. Selection of those that were obviously not written by native speakers or could not be considered cover letters produced over one hundred letters for the analysis. These were further divided in two main sub-groups: first, counting about sixty letters, which contained all the letters reacting to an advertisement (all the Alaskan letters and some of the teaching-job letters) and second with about the same number of letters that were sent spontaneously. There was also a minor group of only five letters written on recommendation. But since their number is not representative, they do not form any special group.

We do realize that homogenous sources would bring more scientific results. It was, however, extremely difficult to get access to any such material as it is considered extremely sensitive material containing personal information (HR Departments actually need in most cases an Agreement signed by the applicant, stating that he or she allows them to use the personal information for the purpose of searching for a position, or employment only).

This fact also caused the incompleteness of some letters. Many institutions were uncomfortable giving this information even after reassurances of complete anonymity (personal data analysis was not part of the plan of this thesis at any stage) and they deleted not only personal details but sometimes also all the salutations. The analysis is therefore based only on

the body of the letter – the introduction, the part that is for the purpose of this thesis called main body and the conclusion.

Also, with the letters reacting to the language schools it was in most cases impossible to discern whether it was primarily sent in the body of the e-mail or as a more formal attachment that would more remain of a hard copy letter. It could be argued that both ways could cause differences in the use of language. Unfortunately, the fact that we received all these letters electronically limits the possibility of this distinction.

For the above mentioned reasons, the research works with material available, aiming at looking for similarities and differences between them. Their relative heterogeneity may therefore allow for comparisons of attitude of different applicants to the same genre.

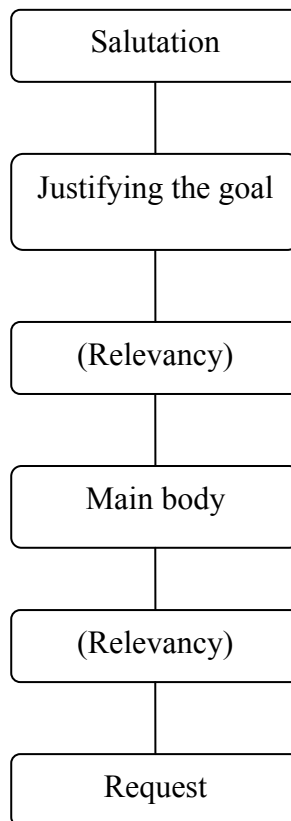
7.3 Sequencing of information

Despite the fact that Van Dijk's conclusions about requests (Chapter 4) were drawn from the study of conversations, our analysis reveals that very analogical principles are applicable even for cover letters – monologues by nature. One of the plausible explanations could come from the uniqueness of the situation: such letter might be the applicant's only chance to make a good impression and he or she therefore attempts to include dialogic structure to answer possible questions or doubts just as if having a conversation with the prospective employer. The awareness of how to do this stems from the socialized rules and typical moves made to reach particular ends and they come intuitively. They are also reflected in many business letter-writing manuals many applicants consult. Apart from the most appropriate sequencing, they advise on the most effective formulaic language.

Equivalence with van Dijk's conclusions is manifested in each part of cover letter, although the grouping and sequencing of information may partially differ. The following diagram shows the most typical structure found

in our analysis (the respective parts of the schema may not necessarily correspond with paragraphing in all the letters).

Figure: 7-1. Sequencing of the parts of cover letter



Since van Dijk considers greetings rather marginal (though not unimportant) part of requests and at the same time our material is due to its source not consistent concerning the occurrence of salutations, they will not be analyzed in detail. It would perhaps be interesting, nevertheless, to mention just a few points related to salutations found in our analysis.

Salutations range from the most formal and anonymous (*To Whom it may concern*; *Dear Search Committee Members*; *Dear Director*; *Dear Sir/Madam*; in several instances, the salutation was avoided altogether by placing the recipient's address instead of it), over the more specific addressing

a person with *Dear* + either last name, first and last name or less formally only the first name, to very informal greetings such as *Hello; Ahoj!* or even *Greetings from Žižkov!*

The last two examples were taken from the cover letters received from the applicants aspiring to a teaching position in our country. The reason for this very informal choice was perhaps to indirectly show the motivation, familiarity and connection with the environment. This could be taken as a plus for someone applying for a job in the Czech Republic whose domain will be language in the first place. At the same time, it is an informal way how to avoid the lack of information about the recipient, especially for letters sent off in group e-mails. Although not all the sources contained salutation, in those that did there was a clear (and not surprising) tendency in the decrease of formality in the e-mailed letters.

The first of van Dijk's points ('establishing the necessary condition') is in cover letters analogical to applicant's initial **justification of the goal** together with explaining the reason for contacting the addressee. This part is sometimes blended with the next two Van Dijk's points: 'motivating the request' and, although rarely, 'stating a condition'. They are either found in the introduction or in the **main body**⁵ of the letter together with the description of applicant's experience and qualifications. In some cases these are accompanied with an enumeration of the most important soft skills or attitude to work. More often than not, the main body is introduced and/or closed with a varying degree of explicit **relevancy** of the applicant with the position or institution applied to. Remarks on compatibility may occur anywhere throughout the letter but most often it happens closing the introductory part or immediately preceding or following the request. Apart from giving arguments they function as an effective summary and logical connector of the information. The two remaining points 'request-proposition' and 'statement of intentions with respect to the object as repeated motivation' are interconnected in the closing of the letter containing more or less direct **request** for an interview.

⁵ For the purpose of this thesis we will restrict the term 'main body' of the letter only to the part where experience, qualification etc. are presented.

This structure shows that request as potentially the most threatening act needs to be carefully argued before it is made – all parts preceding it act as its grounders, making the request more acceptable for the addressee. Although not all letters strictly adhere to the above-suggested points, most of them do follow their structure at least to the extent that they include them, albeit in a slightly different order of appearance. Very rarely – especially in the e-mailed letters – request may appear in the introductory part of the letter and is grounded only retrospectively.

It is, however, not only the contents but especially the formulation of the letter and particularly the politeness strategies which attempt to make it effective. Their choice is related both to the context – the situation of applying for a job, the relative power difference between the participants where one has the power over the other to decide whether to continue in the recruitment process, or the fact that the contact is not face-to-face – and the individual understanding of this situation reflecting the personality of the person writing the letter. Since this thesis is oriented socio-linguistically, it does not attempt to make any psychological inferences. The rest of the analysis therefore focuses on the linguistic strategies in the letters and their explanation with respect to this particular kind of interaction.

7.3.1 Justifying the goal

In almost all cases, the very first sentence of the introductory part of cover letters explains the reasons for applicant's contacting the addressee and expresses what may be expected further on. The most direct examples of explaining the reason for writing the letter contain the verb *apply*. The low frequency with which this verb appears alone suggests that it is too strong and bald on record to be suitable for most applicants. For this reason, most of them use various hedges to soften the impact of the performative through negative politeness strategy:

- (1) *I am interested in applying for a position of...*
- (2) *I would like to formally submit my application...*
- (3) *I am writing to apply for...*
- (4) *I am sending my application for...*

Each case diverts the attention from the threatening verb in favor of different verbs. Generally, there seems to be a tendency to avoid verbs that are overtly directed towards the reader and especially those that require some action on his or her part. Instead, verbs that primarily concern the applicant himself are used – those that convey his or her *interest* or verbs that switch the focus to an activity only related to applying as its necessary precondition (such as *writing*).

The verbs may be further supported by conditionals or progressive verb forms, giving them more hypothetical meaning in the first case or, in the second, stressing the substitutional activity even more through concentration on an instantaneous point in time – in this case the time when the writing occurs (which, due to the written mode of communication, is different from the time of the reader, making it even less immediate and demanding).

By far the most popular form of introduction in the letters reacting to a specific position is simply but rather vaguely expressed:

- (5) *I am interested in the position of...* or even more indirectly
- (6) *I would like to express my interest in the position...*

This approach completely avoids verbs directly concerning the addressee and any action required from him or her and only provides off-record associative clues by and triggering the known script. Also, stressing mere *interest* expresses only potential intentions so far, avoiding any action as yet and so approaching the reader more gradually and less demandingly.

The latter example also points to common trait of some more expressive letters that use the language of feelings and emotion. Introductions as the following can be found:

- (7) *I am pleased to submit my application...*
- (8) *I am excited to correspond with you...*
- (9) *It is with great pleasure that I take this opportunity to...*

Expressions of positive feelings experienced in connection with the addressee are analogical to the strategy of 'giving gifts' or generally claiming common ground, both as positive politeness strategies expressing sympathy through favorable appraisal of the reader.

The potential threat to the addressee may be also effectively reduced by giving reasons. One of them can be reference to an advertisement the addressee had posted in the first place. The applicant's reaction may thus be understood as the logical and complementary step following the demand. Whenever they can, applicants refer to the posting and so justify their imposition to the reader.

- (10) *I am responding to your advertisement for EFL teacher.*
- (11) *I am interested in the position of EFL teacher you are offering/you have currently available...*
- (12) *I am writing in regards with the position the UAF advertised...*
- (13) *I am writing regarding the posting for the position of Director of Financial Services.*
- (14) *I am applying for the Administrative Assistant, Fiscal Technician 3(Posting 0053923).*

While all examples use a reference to the advertisement and sometimes also its source, the last is an instance of an applicant who is extremely consistent in defining the position including an exact number of the posting. It could be argued that he or she is doing so in order to justify his or her application as accurately as possible with reference to objective sources, in

order to downsize the imposition. (From this, the prospective employer could also make partial, yet possibly misleading, conclusions about the precision of the applicant's character – a trait especially welcome in money-related positions). At the same time, it could be taken as the applicant's regards for the addressee – specification of the position can be very useful especially for employers who advertise more positions at the same time.

Interestingly, the use of such objective information corresponds to the generally detached formulations appearing throughout the letter this example has been taken from. In its introduction they are manifested through the avoidance of any mention of “you” where other letters use at least pronouns or general names like *the UFA* referring to the recipient. Similar extremes support the idea that there is a large degree of volition involved in the choices of strategies.

As another reason for writing can be regarded a recommendation from a third party. Since personal recommendation may increase the chances to get interviewed, the applicants mention it if they can because such information may make their claim more relevant (especially if the recommendation comes from someone whose opinion counts). For this reason, identification of such person tends to be quite specific. In spite of this advantage they do not cease to soften their assuredness and use downtoners to modulate the effect on the reader as in:

- (15) *I heard about your school from XY of YZ and he suggested that you might be interested in hiring new English teachers.*

First of all, the responsibility is removed from the applicant by the fact that he or she has heard about the opportunity from someone else. This is further hedged by the information that this person has only *suggested* this information. Using this strategy of ‘not assuming’ the addressee's intentions to offer a position, the modal *might* is added together with the shift of

attention to the mere interest preceding the performative verb as explained above.

In a very similar vein operate inquiries about possible vacancies expressed in the spontaneous cover letters – the more so as the authors really cannot be sure if there is a position they could be offered.

- (16) *I am writing to inquire about possible vacancies for the 2005/2006 school year.*
- (17) *I am looking for any teaching jobs you might have currently open at our school.*

Apart from various ways of pointing to the source of information, there are diverse tendencies in relating to the subject offering the position which reflects the perceived distance between them. While some letters directly mention that it was the “you” who asked for response (or at least less directly refer to him or her through another pronoun), others relate to the other party as to an entire organization – the university or language school – making it less personal and at the same time removing the responsibility from the individual dealing with the letter. Still others avoid explicit involvement of the reader completely, focusing only on the position as shown in the examples (13) and (14) above. Although most letters operate from the ego-perspective of the author and tend to avoid the addressee in connection with the performatives, there are some in which the applicant prefers to remain at least partly hidden. The following examples are instances of the agent being suppressed in favor of the existence of the letter or resume.

- (18) *This letter is being written in pursuit of employment...*
- (19) *Enclosed for your consideration is my resume...*
- (20) *My letter to you is to express my interest in the position....*

In the last two examples, however, the author chose to remain present at least partially through the use of the possessive pronouns. Moreover, there is a clear connection made between the *my* and *you/r* so as to point out the relatedness.

Other examples when the author wishes to remain fully or partially hidden contain a very mild form of request. Although the orientation towards “you” is not as frequent at the beginning of a letter, initiating a letter with a request is even less so as it might be quite daring. On the other hand, for the same reason it can be an effective attention-catcher when deprived of the possibly threatening air. One of the means to do so, is the use of the most obvious politeness marker indicating that a request will follow – *please* – together with asking for acceptance:

- (21) *Please, accept this letter as my application for the position...*
- (22) *Please, accept my resume as intent to apply for the position...*

The most likely explanation for the use of such direct turning to the addressee is the fact that it seems as if the applicant was actually offering something for the addressee’s benefit (which is partially true as a new employee can indeed be a benefit to the employer). Moreover, the applicant asks for acceptance of the letter and resume, not him or herself directly, which contributes to keeping the distance as well.

Another way to justify contacting the recipient is to stress the fact that their goals are mutual because the applicant has the qualities the addressee is seeking. Generally speaking, this is the strategy of claiming common ground through positive politeness. They are shown most vividly in the more or less explicit relevancy made at the end of introduction or elsewhere in the letter, analogical to ‘giving reasons’.

7.3.2 Relevancy with the position

Relevancy with the position in our terms takes the form of explicit self-assessment in connection with the position (or institutions) and their relatedness to applicants' past experience, education, soft skills or motivation. They usually mention one or more of these items, relative to the position they apply for.

Just like in the introduction, also here are found attempts at interacting with the addressee through taking his or her point of view and so claim common ground – a strategy especially powerful in aiming at finding the intersection between the applicant's qualities and the needs of the position.

(23) *You will find my background directly applicable to your needs.*

The above example shows how the applicant, specifying his or her offer in rather self-confident terms, aims at balancing it off with addressing directly the reader and attempting to seek agreement. What could from one point of view be considered as self-assured assessment the addressee should agree with, would in the Brown and Levinson terms be explained differently: expressing the information in a rather matter-of-fact manner, the applicant softens his or her informing the addressee about something new and therefore slightly reduces the importance of such information (and him or herself as well), in order not to threaten the reader by excessive self-praise.

The next example is even more careful about not imposing and combines the above strategy with subjectivity, presenting the opinion as more applicant's own.

(24) *I hope you will find I more than meet all the qualifications for the position.*

Similar downtoning, aiming at avoiding disagreement could also serve as balancing the self-assured characterization to come. Similar device can be a strategic step in the micro-sense of the sentence as a preparation for using the rather strong modified adjective *directly applicable* or adverbs like *more than*, revealing a degree of self-esteem. These two examples show that since self-assessment and praise are acts potentially dangerous to the addressee's positive face, they need to be professed carefully and compensated for through various other means.

The next example is a relatively rare treatment of expressing relevancy with the position. In fact, there was only one single letter in our body of data, using such 'visionary' ideas in connection with the addressee. The author of this example first states an ideal agreeable to the addressee and then relates it to his or her qualities and ability to fulfill this ideal, to point out the relevancy.

- (25) *I firmly believe that the University of Alaska will play a pivotal role in the future success of our State and I am convinced that I can use my experience and talents to assist in developing that role.*

Using Blum-Kulka's definition of sweeteners, which are to express the "appreciation of the hearer's ability to comply with the request" (1984: 205), after first describing this ability in superb terms, it becomes clear why the author went into such imaginative length to make his relevant point.

Other examples of indirect praise of the prospective employer blended with personal motivation and self-presentation may be found in the following extracts:

- (26) *I am looking for a full-time teaching position in a progressive school which values its students and will provide me with opportunities to develop my skills as a teacher.*

- (27) *I have been employed at the University of Utah for over a year and love the ever changing and always evolving atmosphere of a higher education institution. Now, that I am relocated to Fairbanks, Alaska, I would delight in continuing to work in higher education.*

Here, both institutions referred to are characterized in a positive way. Since the applicant is interested in working in such a place and pursuing employment with the school addressed, he or she is simultaneously indirectly ascribing it the listed attributes. At the same time, those qualities are mentioned in connection with the applicant's own qualities, which drawn in this way seem to promise to bring mutual satisfaction.

Sweeteners, however, do not appear as often or they tend to be formulated off record. From here probably comes the sometimes flowery manner of expressing some of them. Although praising is a common speech act, it can be just as threatening as self-praise. In certain contexts it can sound cheap in the sense that the praise is not sincere because it is not well-founded. Comparing the sources provided for our analysis, this would be the case especially with the spontaneous letters. As opposed to those reacting to specific stimulus of either advertisement or recommendation, spontaneous letters are often (but not always) sent to numerous recipients in one single e-mail without knowing much about them. It would therefore be difficult to believe any stronger identification as yet.

Apart from using self-assessment, there is a possibility to use the opinion of a third party, very analogically like in the introductory justifying part. Again, such approach is likely to be found in letters written on recommendation by someone relevant.

- (28) *I am writing to you at the suggestion of a student at Skoda in Mlada Boleslav. She thinks you might be able to use my skills as a teacher.*

This example makes a link between the applicant's *skills as a teacher* and the fact that the addressee can make use of them. The direct power of such statement is, however, weakened through voicing someone else's opinion. Following the negative politeness strategy of not presuming, the author of the letter further reduces the assumption with the use of modals *might* and *able to*.

Relevancy is also frequently formulated implicitly by focusing for example on qualification. In most letters it is dealt with in the main body. More than half of the spontaneous letters for teaching position, however, states this information in the very first place even before justifying the goal.

- (29) *Having completed the TESL certification this June, I am eager to embark on my career.*
- (30) *I am a certified TESOL teacher and I am currently looking for employment.*

The remaining 'teaching positions' letters mention certification immediately following their justification for writing. The first reason may be that most of them have gained their TEFL certification only recently and it has therefore special value in their career at the moment. Second and perhaps more important reason is the fact that their qualification is what distinguishes them from the competition of other English speaking people who would also be able to speak good English but not teach professionally. The applicants therefore want to increase the chance that their letter and resume will be paid attention to, as the certificate may be the decisive factor for hiring them. Although many applicants want to add argumentative force to their knowledge of English by stressing where they come from, in most cases it will be a native speaker with certification rather than one without it who will be considered for the position.

Mentioning the homeland may also be part of one's identification, which seems to be very important introductory aspect of the spontaneous letters. More than third of the letters begins with the phrase *My name is...* (*and*

I come from/I am a native of...). Interestingly, some applicants even join their name and location into one feature of their identity when they write

(31) *My name is XY from New York City.*

A comparison of the sources reveals that while such identification is important for the spontaneous letters, in the letters reacting to the ads it is used only once. A plausible explanation could be that since there is no stimulus they would be reacting to, they feel it necessary to make their letter less anonymous by introducing themselves before making a request. Revealing personal information may also be perceived as the applicant's own investment into good relationship, showing safe intentions analogically to the ritual of shaking hands in personal contact.

Using personal motivation as the main relevancy with the position is, however, only a very marginal choice because it misses any objectivity the addressee could test. And so arguments such as the following seem to lack argumentative power, especially if used in the introductory part of the letter.

(32) *I would very much like to work for the University of Alaska and believe that it would be a great experience.*

Even letters by applicants for the teaching positions where personal motivation and enthusiasm is an important factor tend to combine it in the introductory chapters with experience or qualification.

(33) *I am a certified English teacher with a strong interest in the finer details of the language. I believe that this interest combined with my teaching experience will make me a highly effective ESL teacher for your company.*

This extract is also an example of using the introductory part as a proper introduction in the sense that it states the main points before it offers more detailed arguments in the main body.

7.3.3 Main body

If relevancy was meant to summarize information, the main body of the letter is there to give more detailed information on the mentioned qualities, presenting past experience, education, soft skills or motivation in more detail. The applicants usually mention one or more of these items, relative to the position they apply for and making use of a variety of downtoners so as not to offend the addressee through boasting.

The Alaskan letters tend to stress experience in the first place. This perhaps stems from the fact that in the positions they apply to, experience is the most valued aspect. Its description is supported by the names of previous positions, listing of the responsibilities, the years spent doing them and sometimes by the results and successes achieved on the position.

- (34) *I have over nine years of experience in payroll processing, six of which were in the Controller's Office of The Permanent Medical Group. All nine years of my experience involved payroll processing for 400 to 600 individuals, in various payroll categories.*

This is, however, an example of a very direct self-presentation. More often it is the case that it is softened by phrases ensuring the balance between the applicants' achievements and the addressee's positive face.

If experience and qualification are listed, it is often preceded by structures such as the following, providing another type of logical linking of information:

- (35) *As you will see from my enclosed resume...*
(36) *You will notice on my resume...*
(37) *As my resume indicates...*

Reference to the attachments softens the impact by pointing to contextualized facts from the applicant's career. And although it is also only the applicant him or herself who writes the resume, it seems as if reference to some other document switches the attention from applicant's own self-characterization in the cover letter (more on this in 7.3.4.).

It is perhaps also not a coincidence that any mention of the enclosed resume is (explicitly or implicitly) "you-oriented" through including the reader in the process; apart from the above examples, instances such as

- (38) *My resume is enclosed for your consideration and review...*
(39) *As can be seen from my attached CV, I have used a wide range of textbooks covering all levels.*

They not only indirectly draw attention to the attachments. They also off-recordly suggest to the addressee what to do with it – to review or read it – without using a requestive. As such it is acting as part of the pre-request and necessary pre-condition of being considered for the position. As suggested in the previous chapter, addressing the reader in this way is also meant to suggest that the information will not be anything novel to him or her.

A more indirect form would use passive, avoiding to mention the addressee in connection with the required activity, which itself is softened with a modal verb *can*. Such expressions are as if to say that anyone who wants can see it and it does not necessarily have to be the reader, making the consideration only volitional and so removing part or the pressure from the reader.

Addressing directly the reader also proved as a popular strategy in the several instances when the applicants referred to qualities they know they lack

– although this is not done very often as they do not want to draw attention to their faults (in some cases, however, concealing them could cause unpleasant surprises in the future so it is more than advisable to mention them). In the following example faults are mentioned deliberately but balanced with confidentially addressing the reader to prevent any doubts in advance and also perhaps hoping for an excuse (as to how will this information be processed is another matter):

(40) *As you will also notice, I do not have any teaching experience but...*

This further supports the conclusion, that the inclusion of the reader is a popular device to overcome the distance between the participants, which could be useful when some disadvantageous fact is mentioned.

Especially in the domain of soft skills, which are very difficult to assess – be it interpersonal skills, attitude to work or volitional qualities – the effect of indirect characterization may be reached through an opinion mediated in the enclosed references. Or else, by structures indirectly voicing the opinion of someone else, like the following:

(41) *I have attached references attesting to my...*

(42) *I consistently received positive feedback on my timeliness, base of knowledge and positive attitude.*

(43) *I have enjoyed a reputation as an efficient accountant...*

The characterization may, however, also indirectly come from the demands of the current position, being based on the presupposition that if the person is capable to hold it he or she should possess the necessary qualities.

(44) *In my current position, I frequently have the opportunity to display my professionalism and confidentiality...*

- (45) *As s Chief Financial Officer I have been principle advisor to the Board of Directors on all resource issues with the entrusted duties to provide...*
- (46) *These achievements represent a wide range of skills and knowledge that demonstrate my ability to exceed expectations...*

A very common way of modest description is downgrading one's achievements using a ("minus") committer (House and Kasper, 1981: 167) which stresses the subjectivity of the opinion and so makes it less threatening to the reader. They are frequently employed when the threat to the addressee is imminent, that is when the applicant explains how relevant employee he or she would be. Most cover letters make use of devices such as:

- (47) *... my experience that... I know would transition well into the highly skilled position you are looking to fill.*
- (48) *I am confident my 15+ years clerical experience, coupled with my drive and enthusiasm, would enable me to make a significant contribution to your organization.*
- (49) *I believe these qualities make me an excellent choice for administrative secretary.*
- (50) *I feel that my past job experience and previous schooling will complement the requirements for the Fiscal Technician.*

Moreover, ordering the examples on the above suggested scale shows that there is a semantic difference in the degree of this subjectivity – to *know* something is a more rational and in the traditional sense more objective than to *feel* as an ultimately subjective quality. Therefore, the verbs oriented

towards feeling relativize the applicant's opinion even more than those referring to reason.

The modesty goal of such "minus" committers is proved by instances when the applicant hesitates even about using a stronger degree of adjectives describing his or her qualities:

(51) *I feel it gives me a more insightful look into...*

(52) *I feel most of my time has been spent on...*

This person used *I feel* whenever he or she dared to evaluate something as *more* or *most*. It had almost a comical effect when the same expression was used together with a quantity that is very easy to measure – time – which is rather unusual.

Experience can further be played down by means that stress the fact that the applicant values the environment that allowed him or her to gain the experience as in

(53) *I was able to work with the Corporate Boards of
Directors... or*

(54) *The position gave me an opportunity to grow both
professionally and personally...*

Such expressions communicate that it has been an honor for the applicant to do such job and that he or she values the opportunity to work side by side to professionals, partially diminishing his or her own qualities without being humble. Moreover, they focus on the process, not the result and so point to the applicant's potential without claiming perfection.

Also, statements such as the following implicitly communicate that the described qualities have not always been the case and that the writer realizes it has taken some time and effort to gain the proficiency in the field.

- (55) *My training helped me to develop skills...*
- (56) *My diverse employment history has enabled me to develop numerous skills...*
- (57) *I have learned to manage the classroom with assertiveness, over-preparation, and the ability to improvise.*

Another, although not as common, way of expressing modesty is by diminishing the applicant's own merit in favor of circumstances he or she could seemingly not influence (linguistically supported by the use of passive):

- (58) *I have also been blessed to receive the most honorable 2002 Yukon Jamboree "Sobriety Award" in Galena and was invited to speak at the 2003 Huslia Wellness Conference.*

Not only does the author point to the divine will by the use of the verb *blessed*. He or she also mentions an invitation – an act which implies that someone else considered his or her contribution valuable. Both are understood as an honor and at the same time are difficult to decline. The downplay is created by the switch of focus from the author who would be 'responsible' for the success to someone else who wanted the applicant to achieve all this.

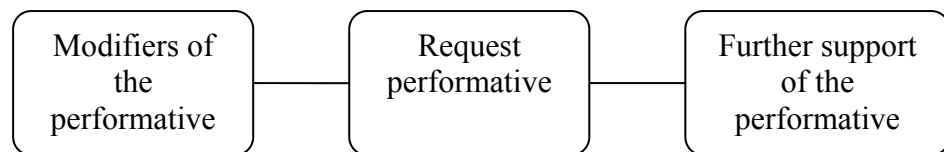
7.3.4 Request

The closing of the letter should logically bridge with the beginning, proposing what is expected to happen in the recruitment process. In most cases, this means that following all the grounders, the applicant makes a request for a personal interview with the addressee. There is, however, variability across the letters as to how 'on record' this is done and what other softeners are employed in making the request.

Immediately preceding the core of the request is very often another reinforcement through motivation or summarized relevancy that may actually

be part of the same sentence. These are, however, only optional supports. What is hardly ever missed are other, quite formulaic moves modifying the potential threat of the act. The general pattern often takes the form suggested in the diagram below:

Figure: 7-2. Request pattern in the closing part of the letter



The following chapters analyze respective parts in more detail, focusing on the politeness strategies employed.

Modifiers of the request

The performative verb formulating the request and actual purpose of the letter is in almost all instances preceded by expressions of personal involvement of the applicant. They cover attitudes such as:

- (59) *I would appreciate/be interested in/love/look forward to/welcome the opportunity to meet and discuss...*

Modifying the performative in such a way helps to shift the threat by connecting the upcoming performative with the applicant's point of view. Apart from that, the attitude described is a hedge to the actual situation – it is likely that he or she would more than appreciate an interview but admits its intensity only partially. Further, this is softened through conditionals, shifting the situation into even more hypothetical tone and so giving the addressee even more of an option.

The fact that the verbs of personal involvement tend to be also modified with adverbs such as *much* or *really* only stresses their subjective air. The more this is presented as solely the applicant's interest, the less pressure it should put on the addressee. Also, such attitude enhances the addressee's positive face by presenting the encounter as something very special, pleasant and desirable for the applicant (as mentioned above in connection with expressive language).

All this implicitly expresses optimistic expectations towards the future in connection with the action of the addressee. The applicant actually says that it would please him or her. If the face-considerations are mutual, it should theoretically be difficult for the addressee to refuse to consider the positive face-wants of someone else. Expressing such optimism creates partial obligation because the reader, minding the applicant's face, will not want to disappoint him or her. Since it is indirect, however, the pressure is not too strong and as Shield argues (see Shield, 2007) the addressee has a host of similarly indirect ways to remedy the offense created by the refusal.

Another commonly used hedge before moving to the performative itself, is stressing that it is a mere *opportunity* the applicant wants from the hearer. Firstly, the word is oriented toward the future, removing the pressure from the immediate moment, reducing the encounter also to a single moment in time and so lessening the impact even more. Secondly, an opportunity is more of a possibility that does not oblige either side to anything as yet.

Request performative

If the performative itself is expressed at all, this is done through a relatively limited range of verbs asking for a chance to *speak*, *meet*, *discuss*, or *interview*. The semantic common denominator suggests a dialogue and participation of both sides in the process. The encounter should be the ultimate point where both parties have a chance to meet in person and formulate their ideas about possible future cooperation.

There does not seem to be much variability in expressing the request performative itself apart from the choice whether to include it, or not to thematize it at all (described below). Again, one of the most significant ways of modifying the performative is to operate with the point-of-view. While for some an open (yet carefully hedged) mentioning of the “you” is a way how to claim common ground, others avoid it in order not to impose on the addressee. They either switch the attention to themselves or opt for nominalization to avoid the agent of the performative most directly connected with the personal contact.

(60) *I look forward to the interview for this position.*

(61) *I look forward to hearing from you to schedule an interview.*

The danger of the first example, however, lies in its presupposing the result as almost sure and it is therefore not used very frequently. As for the second one, although it turns towards the “you”, this is not done primarily in connection with the interview but originally in connection with hearing from the reader. It is off record in the sense that it appears as if the activity (although only receptive) is with the applicant – *I look forward to hearing*. What it does not stress is the fact that it presupposes the activity of the addressee before the applicant can hear anything. The upcoming performative is then expressed through infinitive which helps to avoid the agent. The result is that in both examples it is the applicant that appears to be active without explicitly demanding anything from the addressee.

The object of the performative also acts as softener in reflecting how the authors perceive the power differences between both sides.

(62) *I would appreciate an opportunity to meet and discuss this position with you at your earliest convenience.*

(63) *I look forward to meeting with you and discussing the possibility of future employment.*

- (64) *I welcome the opportunity to meet with you to further discuss my qualification and your need.*
- (65) *I would be interested in speaking with you to discuss the value that my strengths and experience can bring to your company.*

While some offer to discuss the position or future employment focusing on mutual opportunities, others thematize only the benefits brought to the addressee – which is less assertive but conventionally more polite. Examples 62 through 4 seem to more or less explicitly act on more equal terms. The choice of the last example favors one-sidedly the addressee in that it primarily focuses on his or her interests and the relevancy expressed towards him or her. Such approach is used to counterbalance the imposition caused by the request.

As far as the applicant's needs are concerned, these are never mentioned without connection to the addressee's gains. Stressing explicitly the contribution of the employer to the addressee prior to the first interview would be considered inappropriate in a request, which is already demanding in its nature. Instead, many applicants focus once again on what they have to offer to their prospective employer – a form of attending to the hearers' interests, wants and needs to uphold their positive face

Another point of view reveals that example 62 focuses on different part of the process: while this one stresses the recruitment itself (discussion of the position), others look optimistically even further and operate from the perspective of the desirable result (future employment). This distinction is closely connected with optimism and orientation towards the future frequently appearing in the closing of the letter and implying cooperation.

Further support of the performative

It is rarely the case that the request would end the letter. In most cases, following the request, there are structures repeatedly expressing motivation, relevancy or indirectly pointing to what steps are expected to be taken next, actually reinforcing the preceding request.

One way of doing this is to point out the CV and in the following formulaic way express that the applicant wants it to be considered:

(66) *My CV is enclosed for your consideration.*

Since resumes are an integral part of the entire process it seems redundant to mention it again. It could be argued, however, that the purpose of this remark is to stress once again that the addressee should pay attention to the resume and make the decision on its grounds as a necessary pre-condition of making a decision. This conclusion may be further supported by the fact that some applicants feel it necessary to add ... *for your consideration...* to stress what they want to be done with it. Others avoid it as it sounds more as a request, albeit rendered more indirect through nominalization (compare to *for you to consider*).

Any mention of the resume in the final part of the letter also anticipates a skillful switch of the perspective. In most cases the applicants at this point turn from requesting to offering help although the need for it was partially created by them.

(67) *I am available for interviews at your convenience.*

(68) *I can be reached at 123-4567 during working hours and
765-4321 in the evening.*

This time, however, it is put in such a light as if the employer should wish to initiate the contact and the applicant is capable of fulfilling this wish. Such information contains for example details about the applicant's

availability, flexibility in regards to the addressee's time or general willingness to provide further information.

It should also be noted, that on the surface it informs and makes orientation easier – a useful strategy when demanding something from someone. On another level it makes once again an optimistic presupposition about the outcome ('yes, they will want to contact me') that should inspire the addressee to further action.

Since it still remains part of the request, the applicants usually attempt to soften the impact of all extra action on the part of the addressee through the use of passive (concerning the resumes but also the availability for interviews). As explained in the above chapters this perspective avoids mentioning the agent in connection with the demand and so removes part of the pressure from the addressee. Another linguistic device is to use conditionals as in:

(69) *If you have further questions please do not hesitate to contact me.*

(70) *Should you have further questions, feel free to reach me at the above listed number.*

Stating a condition at the beginning is in accord with the negative politeness strategy of not presuming or assuming that the hearer has the need (the more so if it has been created by the applicant as suggested above). At the same time, since a soft command follows, the if-clause softens the command as it limits it precisely to the circumstances and arguments mentioned, hedging the information.

An appeal for contacting the applicant is actually another request acting as a necessary logical precondition for the interview and therefore enforcing the original request. This one is, however, considerably milder as it only makes associative clues with the required action. First of all, the semantics of the verbs suggests freedom of the reader's choice, further softened by the conventional particle *please*, normally suggesting a request.

Due to the switch, it is clear that this time it will be for the reader's benefit and that the choice is with him or her.

Simultaneously, the negative used in this context makes it even more tentative. The switch causes that now it seems that the applicant is actually attending to the reader's needs by offering help and so stressing that they are pursuing the same goal (which is to a large extent true). While on the surface offering help in providing information for a competent decision, it fulfills the function of another FTA. The compensation is reached by the off-record nature of the act.

Another way how to indirectly reinforce the request is the above mentioned formula *I look forward to hearing from you*. Apart from the already mentioned functions it can in combination with specifications such as ... *at your earliest convenience...*, point to the applicant's wish to be informed – and possibly as soon as possible although the choice is seemingly left with the addressee. This rather formulaic expression helps to avoid mentioning any specific time and so makes the request even more harmless. In fact, expressing similar optimism regarding future contact is one of the most common ways of ending the letter. Another very frequent move is simply to thank the addressee for his or her *time and consideration* – a positive politeness strategy acknowledging the effort on the part of the addressee. Concerning the fact that in a conversation thanking normally follows a favor done to the speaker, it further indirectly supports the request and at the same time functions as another reminder to actually pay time and attention to the application.

The two just mentioned phrases are actually so standardized and so specific for this genre that their occurrence itself may off-recordly function as a request. It is very often the case that they entirely substitute the performative and the letter is finished with thanking and/or expressing hopes for future contact.

7.4 Sample letter

To demonstrate the findings more specifically, this chapter uses one of the Alaskan letters and focuses on each analytical part, commenting them in context of linguistic politeness.

To whom it may concern:

I am interested in the Fiscal Technician 3 position you are offering and have enclosed my resume for your review and consideration. I am looking to expand my professional horizons by seeking new challenges in the area of accounting.

As you can see, my career in finance and accounting is extensive. I have enjoyed a reputation as an efficient accountant and have a knack for immediately establishing a good rapport with clients and staff.

The qualifications and professional knowledge I can bring to your organization include:

- *Efficiency: reliability: accuracy with numbers.*
- *Maturity, honesty: ability to look at challenges as opportunities.*
- *Knowledge of general and legal office procedures.*
- *Ability to develop and lead team.*

I believe that my experience is in perfect line with your current needs. If your firm is looking for a dependable, results-oriented professional with a solid performance track, I would be interested in speaking with you to discuss the value that my strengths and experience can bring to your company. I can be reached in confidence at the above telephone numbers or email address and I look forward to hearing from you.

<p>I. Justifying the goal</p>	<p><i>I am interested in the position...</i> uses the most common but also the most vague verb. The addressee may explain it in any way as it triggers the known script – the explanation depends largely on what his or her script contains (off-record strategy) and it is therefore the least endangering.</p>
	<p><i>You are offering...</i> stresses addressee’s demonstrated interest in the first place to account for writing the letter.</p>
	<p><i>Your review and consideration...</i> as a part of the pre-request, this rather common expression states what is expected of the addressee to be (desirably) able to comply with the request to follow. The negative politeness is reflected in the fact that it carefully avoids using the verb denoting the activity demanded from the addressee and opts for nominalization instead.</p>
	<p>This part can be summarized in the following schema:</p> <p>My interest >>> caused by your offer >>> should deserve your attention</p>
	<p>The applicant’s suggestion is immediately followed with motivation as an argument to support the interest, give reasons and also to help to make a link to the next chapter. Unlike most of the letters, which use qualification or experience, this author uses very general motivation as his or her reason for being interested in the position.</p>

<p>II. Main body</p>	<p><i>As you can see...</i> on one hand, this expression once again indirectly suggests what the addressee should learn (between the lines it is a reminder 'please, have a look'). At the same time, it helps seeks agreement with applicant's opinion about own qualities that are to follow. From another point of view, it attempts to convey that this information is not as special as suggested earlier.</p>
	<p>What follows are various devices how to present one's qualities in a good light, relevant to the position and the employer but at the same time not to praise oneself to the extent of boasting.</p> <p>Those include: indirect self-characterization through voicing the general opinion (<i>I have enjoyed a reputation...</i>), especially in connection with qualities that are difficult to assess. Also, the fact that the applicant chose to list the characteristics in points (which is also more reader-friendly) allowed him or her to give plain statements which sound more detached and objective and at the same time avoiding overt self-evaluation. He or she also suppressed the verbs in favor of adjectives and so reached downtoning of the qualities. (This actually goes against one of the advices of letter-writing manuals to use 'action verbs').</p>

III. Request	<p><i>I believe that my experience is in perfect line with your current needs.</i> When pointing out relevancy with the position just before uttering the request, the applicant hedges his or her opinion with a “minus” committer stressing the subjectivity of this conviction especially to counterbalance the positive statements about oneself such as <i>my experience... in perfect line with your... etc.</i></p>
	<p>Another hedge comes in the form of if-clause, enumerating the qualities the applicant claims to have and which are desirable for the specific position. To make the connection and relevancy even stronger, the if-clause is blended in the same sentence with the request. As such, this strategy is slightly manipulative as the only logical step is to invite the person to the interview.</p>
	<p><i>... would be interested to speak with you to discuss...</i> apart from weakening the performatives with a conditional and expressed interest (explained in the previous chapters as negative politeness strategy), the applicant felt the need to use both verbs <i>speak</i> and <i>discuss</i>. If he or she consciously distinguishes between them, the desire to also discuss can suggest the openness to arguments and being prepared to bring her own ones as well.</p>
	<p>Indeed, the arguments he or she would like to bring follow immediately still in the same sentence – they concern <i>the value my strengths and experience can bring to your company.</i></p>

	<p><i>I can be reached...</i> together with <i>I look forward to hearing from you</i> are both reinforcements of the original request for action from the addressee and specification of the steps needed to be taken to do it. Although they basically state 'call me', they only off-recordly imply his in talking about the related activities.</p> <p>The schema of the request may be drawn like this:</p> <p>I offer: minus-commiter of relevancy >>> you: if-clause >>> request >>> contribution/relevancy >>> switch reinforcing the request</p>
--	---

Of notice is also the fact that the entire letter has a very personal tone reached by the frequent addressing of the reader and the use of the "you" point-of-view. This is done especially in connection with relevancy of the applicant for the position. It is a sample using relevancy throughout the letter and frequently stressing the gains of the addressee.

It could also be described as approaching the request rather carefully – beginning with a vague *interest* at the beginning, over various strategies grounding it and building the relationship with the reader and finally making the request, which is again supported with relatively large number of softeners. It is perhaps this careful preparation which allows the applicant to formulate the request using a performative (*speak* and *discuss*) some other letters tend to avoid.

IV. Summary

This thesis is a contribution to the research on requests in connection with politeness. While the first part summarizes the theoretical knowledge concerning the topic, the second is an application of speech act and politeness theories in the context of cover letters sent as a part of application for a job. The analysis shows that specific strategies and formulaic language are used to politely compensate for the imposition of the situation.

First, attention was paid to sequential ritualization connected with requests. The sample provided for our analysis reveals that most letters follow very analogical structure like requests in a dialogue. Apart from salutations, which were in the end not part of our analysis, we identified three fundamental parts appearing in all the letters under scrutiny: justification of the goal – main body – request. Further, relevancy of a various degree of explicitness may facultatively appear within or linking these parts together. All of these parts are integral compounds of the entire macro-speech act. Apart from the request itself (which is, however, also usually composed of several steps) most of them function as grounders that prepare and support the request proper so as to make it less threatening to the reader.

At the same time, such sequence is so typical of requests that its appearance itself is a part of the message communicated as it is indicative of the requesting script in general. Due to this, some facts do not necessarily have to be communicated openly and they are merely implied because the authors rely on the shared knowledge – which is especially useful in case of face-threatening acts.

Our main concern was the analysis of functional choices of linguistic politeness strategies used by the applicants. The theoretical framework employed for this purpose drew from the theories designed mainly by Brown and Levinson and complemented by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper and other researchers. Applied to each analytical part mentioned above, the analysis revealed that there is a relatively limited number of typically used

strategies and that they are used very pragmatically in specific contexts.

Moreover, they tend to be realized by formulaic language acting as a tool for removing part of the threat. Comparison of the letters shows that applicants rely on formulas most strongly at the beginning and especially the end of the letter – the two instances where the face of the readers are potentially threatened the most because an action will be required from them. There is variability even across the formulas, however. The applicants do realize that strong reliance on formulaic language may cause impersonality and lack of individuality, which in this situation is not desirable at all.

The introduction of the letter is meant to prepare the ground. To justify the goal means explaining in more or less direct way what will be required at the end of the act. This calls for a variety of negative or off-record strategies. A limited number of verbs are used the illocutionary force of which is further hedged, usually by means of turning the attention to some substitutional activity (writing, sending or being interested). Very frequent is also operating with the point of view where the surface impression is that the action is left with the applicant, not the addressee. In cases when only interest is expressed, the applicant only triggers associative clues which may but do not necessarily have to be specified in the 'request' part in the conclusion.

The imposition tends to be further balanced by the use of positive politeness strategies that claim common ground, suggest cooperation or fulfill some of the reader's needs. Applicants thus give reasons for writing (reaction to an advertisement, recommendation), express sympathy, seek agreement and avoid disagreement, and generally attempt to show the benefit the reader may gain (especially so through relevancy, expressed at any point in the letter). The latter is often accompanied by means conveying that the applicant does not presume anything, further supported by various modals.

The main body is primarily focused on detailed self-presentation, yet in such a way that is not boastful. The strategies are therefore predominantly positive, stressing common ground and possible cooperation. The positive face of the addressee is also taken care of through rather indirect description of the qualities – mentioning of enclosed attachments (be it resume or written

references) that mediate the information, or other indirect characterizations (e.g. demands of the current position). The danger is further be downplayed by various means stressing the subjectivity of the opinion (hedging “minus” committers) or rather formulaic *as you will see* or *you will notice* that present the information as less of a surprise.

The request itself typically consists of several more moves (although not all of them need to be always included). Apart from repeated relevancy immediately before or after the request, the performative is again softened through expressions of personal involvement, conditionals and various other hedges limiting the force. The perspective is again ego-oriented in connection with the action. If the “you” is mentioned, this is always balanced off with the benefits gained. For this purpose, many applicants use a kind of switch, following the request: they offer their help in something the addressee actually did not ask for. This is a device used to indirectly suggest what steps are expected from the addressee and so reinforcing the request (*I can be reached, I am looking forward to hearing from you* etc). There are, however, also letters that avoid naming the performative altogether and use only the switch or simple thanking as off-record strategies based on the known script.

All the cover letters used some kind of politeness strategy to account for the fact that they are requesting something from another person who may not chose to comply and who has, moreover, the power to decide over an important aspect of life – one’s employment. While it could be said, that the central part used predominantly positive politeness strategies, the positive and negative strategies overlapped in different parts of the introduction and conclusion. Interestingly, there were not any significant differences between the letters concerning their origin (apart from the obvious fact that they referred to specific circumstances, were spontaneous or, conversely, reacted to an advertisement). Although the number of the typically employed strategies was relatively limited, their combinations and degree was variable. This points to the fact that there is relative freedom in terms of choosing the approach within the given boundaries; it reflects the personal understanding of the

imposition and distance between the participants and therefore the need to politely account for it.

The focus of this thesis was to apply the theoretical background to data from real-life situations and simultaneously explain the pragmatic choices in the particular situation. The entire body of letters was divided for analytical purposes in several groups and each letter into further analytical parts which were studied from one angle with the tools available and the goal in mind. It would be very interesting to continue with the same data and be able to include variables such as for example gender, class or country of origin of the native speakers which could show significant tendencies in the use of strategies across the categories. Interesting results could be further reached if combining these aspects for example with the stylistic level of language as used in this particular communicative situation.

V. Závěr

VI. Works Cited

Bach, Kent and Robert M. Harnish (1979). *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Baugh, Sue L., Maridell Fryar, David A. Thomas (1995). *How to Write First-class Business Correspondence: the Handbook for Business Writing*. NTC Publishing Group.

Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise its the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books.

Blum-Kulka, Shoshana and Elite Olshtain (1984). „Requests and Apologie: A Gross-Cultural Study of Speech Acts Realization Patterns (CCSARP).“ *Applied Linguistics* 5:3, 196-213.

Brown, Penelope and Steven C. Levinson (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coulmans, Florian (1981). “Introduction” In F. Coulmans (ed.), *Conversational Routine: Explorations in Standardized Communication Situations and Prepatterned Speech*. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.

Deckin, Brian (1977). *Letter Writing In English*. Camelot Press Ltd.: Southampton.

Drew, Paul and John Heritage, eds. (1992). *Talk at work: interaction in institutional settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eelen, Gino (2001). *A Critique of Politeness Theories*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.

Foley, William A. (1997). *Anthropological Linguistics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fraser, Bruce (1990). „Perspectives on Politeness“. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14 (2): 219-36.

Fukushima, Saeko (2004). „Evaluation of Politeness: The case of attentiveness“. *Multilingua* 23, 365-387.

Geffner, Andrea B. (1998). *Business English: A complete Guide to Developing an Effective Business Writing Style*. 3rd ed. New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc.

Goffman, Erving (1967). *Interaction ritual. Essays on Face-to-face behavior*. Anchor Books: New York.

Grice, H. Paul (1975). „Logic and Conversation.“ In P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics, vol 3: Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press, 41-58.

Gu, Yueguo (1990). „Politeness phenomena in Modern Chinese“. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14, 237-257.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1984). *Language as Social semiotic*. Bath: The Pitman Press.

Higgins, Claudia and Timothy A. Judge (2004). „The Effect of Applicant Influence Tactics on Recruiter Perceptions of Fit and Hiring Recommendations: A Field Study“. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 89, No. 4, 622-632.

Hofstede, Geert H. (2004). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Hofstede, Geert H. (1991). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.

Hofstede, Geert H. (1980). *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

House, Juliane and Gabriele Kasper (1981). "Politeness Markers in English and German." In F. Coulmans (ed.), *Conversational Routine: Explorations in Standardized Communication Situations and Prepatterned Speech*. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter, 155-185.

Ide, Sachiko, B. Hill, Y. M. Carnes, T. Ogino, A. Kawasaki (1992). "The Concept of Politeness: An Empirical Study of American English and Japanese." In R. Watts, S. Ide, K. Ehrlich (eds.), *Politeness in language: Studies in its History, Theory and Practice*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 281-297.

Leech, Geoffrey (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.

Levinson, Stephen. C. (1983) *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Parsons, Talcott (1967). *Sociological Theory and Modern Society*. New York, N.Y.: Free Press.

Poe, Roy W. (1994). *The McGraw-Hill Handbook of Business Letters*. 3rd ed. McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Rees, Nigel (1994). *Bloomsbury Guide to Letter Writing*. London: Bloomsbury.

Schlenker, R. Barry (1980). *Impression-Management: The Self-concept, Social Identity and Interpersonal relations*. California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co.

Seglin, J. L. (1995). *The AMA Handbook of Business Letter*. 2nd ed. New York: American Management Association.

Sifianou, Maria (1992). *Politeness Phenomena in England and Greece*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Searle, John. R. (1985). *Expression and meaning: Studies in the theory of speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, Richard (2002). *Jak se ucházet o práci*. Praha: Portál.

Stevens, Cynthia K. and Amy L. Kristof (1995). „Making the Right Impression: A Field Study of Applicant Impression Management Dutiny Job Interview“ *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 80, No. 5. 587-606.

Shieldová, Ivona (2006). „Politeness Strategies in American and Japanese Employment Rejection Letters.“ Diss. Univerzita Palackého.

Švehlová, Milena (1994). „Zdvořilost a řečová etiketa.“ *Filologické studie XIX*. Praha: Karolinum, 39-61.

Tárnyiková, Jarmila (2002). *From Text to Texture*. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého.

Tárnyiková, Jarmila (2007). *Sentence complexes in Text. Processing Strategie in English and Czech*. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého.

Tsui, Amy (1994). *English Conversation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

van Dijk, Teun A. 1997. *Discourse as Social Interaction*. London: Sage Publications.

Watts, Richard (2004). *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wierzbicka, Anna (1991). *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: The Semiotics of Human Interaction*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Internet sources:

Hofstede, Geert (2003). *Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions*. 20 Feb, 2008.

<http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_united_kingdom.shtml>,

<http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_united_states.shtml>.

Xinke, Tian and Zhao Haiyan. "On Specificity of Politeness. Contrastive Study of Western and Chinese Concepts of Politeness". *Sino-US Teaching*, No. 2. 2006.

15 Feb, 2008. <<http://www.linguist.org.cn/doc/su200602/su20060216.pdf>>.

.

Links to electronical cover letter writing manuals (anonymous):

12 Dec, 2007. <<http://www.career.vt.edu/JOBSEARC/coversamples.htm>>.

12 Dec 2007. <<http://www.careerone.com.au/jobs/job-search/get-that-job/improve-your-cover-letter>>.

12 Dec, 2007. <http://www.cdm.uwaterloo.ca/step4_3_1.asp>.

13 Dec, 2007. <<http://www.collegegrad.com/jobsearch/Best-College-Cover-Letters/The-Reality-of-Cover-Letters>>.

13 Dec, 2007. <http://www.myfuture.com/toolbox/coverletter_all.html#byw>.