

Revealing indexicality in situated writing: negotiating second-language politeness indexes in job application letters*

Revelar la indexación en la escritura especializada: negociación de índices de cortesía en una segunda lengua en las cartas de solicitud de empleo

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ABSTRACT

Writing proficiently in any language requires knowing about much more than grammar, lexis, register, genres, audience and rhetorical situation. It also requires that writers call upon implicit sociocultural and contextual inferences made via *indexes*. Indexes convey a wide range of sociocultural information about social background, professional and cultural identity, affective and epistemological positioning, gender and ethnicity. The ways in which this information is indexed, however, can vary significantly from one language to another, making indexicality a significant concern for international writers as they negotiate their positions through writing. This paper describes a novel method in writing research, indexical analysis, which is used to describe how French politeness norms are indexed in application letters written in English by first-language (L1) French students. It was found that although the students' writing was considered grammatically correct, divergences in terms of where and how politeness was expressed resulted in a negative evaluation by readers. Developing more conscious awareness of the implicit norms that organize thoughts and attitudes for both writers and readers may

Keywords: French politeness norms, indexical analysis, indexicality, international writers, inter-indexicality, job application letters.

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allow for better recognition of how indexes can differ across languages.

RESUMEN

Escribir con soltura en cualquier lengua exige conocer mucho más que la gramática, el léxico, el registro, los géneros, la audiencia y la situación retórica. También requiere que los escritores recurran a inferencias socioculturales y contextuales implícitas realizadas a través de índices. Los índices transmiten una amplia gama de información sociocultural sobre el origen social, la identidad profesional y cultural, el posicionamiento afectivo y epistemológico, el género y el origen étnico. Sin embargo, la forma en que se indexa esta información puede variar significativamente de una lengua a otra, lo que hace que la indexicalidad sea una preocupación importante para los escritores internacionales a la hora de negociar sus posiciones a través de la escritura. Este artículo describe un método novedoso en la investigación de la escritura, el análisis indiciario, que se utiliza para identificar cómo se indexan las normas de cortesía francesas en las cartas de solicitud escritas en inglés por estudiantes franceses, cuya primera lengua (L1) es el francés. Se descubrió que, aunque sus escritos se consideraban gramaticalmente correctos, las divergencias en cuanto a dónde y cómo se expresaba la cortesía daban lugar a una evaluación negativa por parte de los lectores. El desarrollo de una mayor conciencia de las normas implícitas que organizan los pensamientos y las actitudes, tanto de los escritores como de los lectores, puede permitir un mejor reconocimiento de cómo los índices pueden diferir entre las lenguas.

Palabras clave: análisis indiciario, cartas de solicitud de empleo, escritores internacionales, indexicalidad, interindexicalidad, normas francesas de cortesía.

Introduction

Helping students become successful writers requires implementing a writing pedagogy that includes long-term engagement with disciplinary topics, culture and genres. One successful writing pedagogy to address such concerns is the genre-based approach, which identifies the features and contexts of particular academic, scientific and professional genres to help students become more competent communicators in the specific social practices of their target contexts. It has long been recognized, however, that becoming a proficient writer requires more than learning genres' explicit forms and surrounding contexts (Beaufort, 1999; Freedman, 1999; Russell, 1997). Legitimate and credible writing also relies on the ability to wield and interpret implicit sociocultural and contextual inferences made via indexes in the writing, which can be challenging for novice and less-experienced student writers. In effect, while indexes can be hard to discern in one's first language, they often textualize differently in a second language, even within the same genre. Situated writing's indexical nature can also complicate practitioners' explanations for why student writing sometimes does not 'meet expectations'.

This paper's premise is that examining such challenges through the frame of indexicality may contribute to a broader understanding of how people learn situated writing expertise. As a social approach informed by linguistic anthropology (Agha, 2007; Blommaert, 2010; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Ochs 1992; Silverstein, 2003), the concept of indexicality focuses researchers' attention on indexes, which are the particular patterns —from morphemes and lexicon to more complex grammatical forms, registers, styles and non-linguistic modes (Ochs, 1992)— that tacitly signal relevant sociocultural information to informed insiders. Indexes communicate a wealth of information about types of speakers, writers and contexts, as well as a community's social order: its absolute and relative values, hierarchy, ideologies, and expectations about behaviors and communication practices. Participants rely on indexes to infer and create the perception of shared social meaning, thereby building the tacit local knowledge (Geertz, 1973) that anchors and organizes their practices within specific communities.

Using this lens, this paper seeks to address a well-defined gap in writing research, namely, how to identify and assess the conveyance of

sociocultural information through the implicit, indexical elements of communication. Notably, it explores how indexical analysis can provide fuller insight into the sociocultural phenomena that affect writing beyond salient discoursal, syntactic or lexical features, making it a novel way of thinking about the fuller spectrum of written communication. As an interdisciplinary approach, indexical analysis uses a mixed research design drawing on methods and concepts from sociohistorical and diachronic analysis (Atkinson, 1999; Bazerman, 1988), intercultural and qualitative genre analysis (Connor, 2011; Moreno, 2010; Swales, 1990) and ethnographically-informed approaches to writing research (Guillén-Galve & Bocanegra-Valle, 2021; Paltridge et al., 2016). In this paper, the approach is used to explore why the politeness strategies used in job application letters produced in English by international writers may be construed as impolite by first-language (L1) English-speaking readers. In conclusion, the paper considers the implications of indexicality for international writers and its impact on their ability to negotiate indexical complexities while navigating context, culture and communication practices through writing. By bringing together a diverse range of social, cognitive and language phenomena, indexicality is arguably an essential aspect of writing for international audiences.

Using indexicality to examine genre-based politeness strategies

Reader-writer interaction is a key aspect of written genres, and politeness is one of the many ways people have of managing this interaction. Politeness is commonly characterized by linguistic anthropologists as a set of practices for “avoid[ing] communicative discord or offence, and maintain[ing] communicative concord” (Leech, 2005 in Burdelski, 2014, p. 275). Learning to be polite occurs during early childhood socialization and emerges from repeated, contextualized exposure to expected frames, emotions and behaviors in a variety of situations (Gerholm, 2011). As such, knowledge about the politeness expectations in one’s first language and culture becomes tacitly engrained as part of sociocultural identity. Developing proficiency in interacting politely with people from other cultures can thus be challenging because the indexes of polite behavior are often conveyed differently across cultures, including across semiotic modes (Burdelski, 2014).

Politeness is also a key feature of many written genres, including job application letters (Devitt et al., 2004; Henry, 2007; Upton & Connor, 2001). Like politeness, how people use such genres depends on where they learned to use them. Beyond a common language, genre usage indexically conveys information about the locally-situated cultural preferences people share with others from similar educational and sociocultural backgrounds (Kuteeva, 2022; Moreno, 2010; Pérez-Llantada, 2021). One's place of upbringing and interactions with local educational institutions enduringly mark how one communicates across language and sociocultural boundaries, which has significant consequences when writing for international audiences (Cargill & Burgess, 2017; Flowerdew, 2019; Pérez-Llantada et al., 2011).

Using the frame of indexicality to explore how written expectations about politeness manifest differently across cultures in widely-produced genres like job application letters can be useful for three reasons: it integrates a diverse range of sociohistorical, cultural, modal and cognitive phenomena in addition to language; its premise leads to data triangulation and more robust theorizing of sociocultural phenomena by drawing on diverse research methods (e.g., sociohistorical analysis, intercultural discourse analysis, qualitative genre analysis, ethnography-informed methods); it reveals the hidden, tacit knowledge which is both assumed in polite communication practices and a source of discord when not in alignment.

While increasingly recognized as a key concept in discourse analysis (Jones, 2016; Straus & Feiz, 2014) and writing research (Canagarajah, 2022; Davila, 2012; Dressen-Hammouda, 2014; Kuteeva, 2022; Lillis, 2008; Paltridge, 2017), there have been few attempts so far to operationalize indexicality as a tool in writing research. This paper aims to complement existing approaches by describing a novel method, indexical analysis, which contributes an additional theoretical and conceptual ground for investigating how locally-situated cultural preferences affect both writers and readers, in particular when they do not share L1 indexes. The paper frames answers to three research questions: How does the approach provide a basis for identifying indexes, such as politeness strategies, in situated writing practices (RQ1)? To what extent do non-native English-speaking writers draw on indexes associated with their L1 politeness practices when writing for an international audien-

ce (RQ2)? How do readers from other cultures react to such L1 indexes (RQ3)?

Methodology

Description of indexical analysis

Drawing on insights from studies of indexicality in linguistic anthropology (Agha, 2007; Blommaert, 2010; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Ochs 1992; Silverstein, 2003), this paper uses indexical analysis to answer these questions by first identifying potential French politeness indexes and then examining how they are implemented by L1 French writers in English. The approach to indexical analysis proposed here involves contrasting what is ‘formally possible’, ‘contextually appropriate’, and ‘actually attested’ in a language (Hymes, 1972), so as to compare and contrast what could be said, but is not (Beebe, 1994). The method consists of five steps, briefly described below: (1) identifying formal language possibilities; (2) identifying what becomes contextually *inappropriate* over time; (3) contrasting this with what remains contextually appropriate but is only implied; (4) identifying attested indexes; and (5) validating the indexes’ sociocognitive reality.

Step 1. Identifying formal language possibilities

Indexical analysis begins by locating possible indexes within the range of historically-situated language possibilities that are formally available to a community. Since Bazerman’s (1988) sociohistorical study of physics, writing researchers have similarly sought to examine the emergence of patterns of interaction, underlying principles and thought-styles in situated writing. One approach to this task entails tracing the evolution of linguistic and rhetorical forms and equating them with changes in sociocultural context over time (‘form-to-context mapping’), as seen in Atkinson’s (1999) analysis of the development of the scientific register from 1675-1995, Banks’ (2017) comparative French-English study of the evolution the academic article from 1665-1700, Salager-Meyer et al.’s (2003) intercultural comparison of the growth of academic conflict from 1930-1995, or Berkenkotter’s (2008) examination of shifts in 18th-century psychiatric case reporting. Conversely, one could also trace how changes in concepts, decision-making processes, values and intellectual commitments are mediated through language over time (‘con-

text-to-form mapping'). Examples of this approach include Taavitsainen (2001), who investigated the thought-styles in medical discourse in middle and early modern English, and Valle (1999) who studied patterns of knowledge dissemination in the Royal Society and their impact on scientific discourse. Given this paper's focus on how the indexes of historically-situated French politeness norms may impact L1 French writing in English today, the latter approach has been used to trace the emergence of the thought-styles and concepts relevant to French politeness norms as they appear in current job application letter-writing practices.

Step 2. Identifying what becomes contextually inappropriate over time

The second step entails viewing how earlier thought-style and language patterns evolve over time especially with regard to a potential loss of appropriateness, which may result in information no longer being communicated explicitly. To establish inappropriateness, one might determine which language devices change or disappear over time using diachronic genre analysis (Banks, 2017; Salager-Meyer et al., 2003). Another approach, adopted here, seeks to identify the thought-styles which have lost appropriateness. It can be argued that although certain thought-styles become inappropriate and are therefore no longer communicated explicitly, they may still reside in a community's shared conceptual space.

Step 3. Determining what is still contextually appropriate

In effect, what has become contextually inappropriate may still continue to hold relevance in a community and thus be indexed through language, resulting in the information 'being there' although it does not present as a straightforward mapping between linguistic form and social meaning (Ochs, 1992). Discerning such tacitly understood information typically requires adopting an ethnographic approach using participant observation, reflexivity, researcher semi-socialization, long-term engagement and member checks (Guillén-Galve & Bocanegra-Valle, 2021; Paltridge et al., 2016). Ethnographic approaches are crucial for developing an in-depth understanding of the target community's epistemology and belief system, allowing for researcher intuitions about how relevant meaning is mediated through language

although it is not communicated explicitly. While the conditions for researcher semi-socialization are arguably present in the current study¹, I have opted instead for a qualitative sociohistorical analysis of the codification and institutionalization of polite French language patterns in order to reconstruct evidence for ongoing contextual appropriateness. How indexical analysis is constructed using a more-grounded ethnographic approach to reveal situated indexes is discussed in Dressen-Hammouda (in preparation).

Step 4. Identifying actually attested indexes in current writing practices

Determining how historically-situated thought-styles have crystallized as politeness indexes in current writing practices is the next step. To this end, qualitative genre analysis (Swales, 1990) was carried out on a small corpus of recent job application letters in French to establish how the previously identified thought-styles are indexed as politeness. A comparative genre analysis of a second small corpus of job application letters in English seeks to determine whether L1 French-speakers also draw on such indexes when writing in English.

Step 5. Ascertaining the sociocognitive reality of the attested indexes

The final step of indexical analysis entails ensuring that researcher interpretations of indexical meaning are grounded in reality by demonstrating confirmable sociocognitive relevance and significance to community insiders by using member checks (Guillén-Galve & Bocanegra-Valle, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The aim of this phase is to substantiate the validity of the identified indexes by showing two things: first, that writers use them to provide evidence of belonging to a particular sociocultural group; second, that readers from a different sociocultural group are sensitive to their presence and rely on them to make positive and/or negative inferences about “some aspect of the

1 As an English-speaking US-native, I have been living in France since 1997 and working in French higher education since 2002. Although my personal and professional experience constitute significant background, I have not explored its implications through critical reflexivity for this study.

situation at hand [that] is *presupposed* or even *created*" in the writing (Duranti, 2004, p. 458, original emphasis).

Data and procedure

This study implements the five-step method by drawing on two data sets to identify L1 politeness indexes in French writers' application letters in English. The first set establishes a sociohistorical perspective using primary and secondary sources to describe the basis for the concepts, values and intellectual commitments (hereafter 'thought-styles') related to French politeness norms as indexed through language. Early thought-style patterns (1500-1789) were identified as a basis for locating the formal language possibilities indexing polite behavior (Step 1). Next, because thought-styles may become contextually inappropriate over time in response to specific events and shifts in custom, changes to thought-styles resulting from a second period (1789-1799) were explored (Step 2). Recognizing that thought-styles seemingly fallen out of favor may nonetheless retain relevance and therefore tacit appropriateness, evidence for indexical references to earlier thought-styles was sought in the growing codification and institutionalization of French polite language devices (Step 3). Further evidence of these indexical resources was found in diachronic pragmatics studies of historically-situated French politeness structures (Held, 1999; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2011).

The second data set compares current job application letter writing politeness practices in French with how L1 French writers carry out the same tasks in English (Step 4). To identify how the traces of thought-style patterns have materialized as currently-attested politeness indexes, a first small corpus ($n = 4$) was used to determine whether the historically-situated politeness structures described in the literature (D'Iribarne, 1989; 2006; Held, 1999; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2011) are present in recent French-language job application letters. The corpus was compiled from three high-level, professionally-oriented websites ('Aerocontact.fr', 'Cadremploi.fr', and 'Emploipublic.fr') with recommendations updated in 2021 for writing application letters in French. A second pre-existing corpus ($n = 69$) of job application letters produced in English by L1 French undergraduates was then reexamined through the lens of indexical analysis to determine whether these writers repro-

duced cultural-specific politeness indexes when writing in English. The pre-existing corpus was originally described in Dressen-Hammouda (2013) as a local learner corpus (Seidlhofer, 2002), obtained as a timed-writing exercise carried out at the end of semester-long ESP course for second-year undergraduates. The effectiveness of the job application letters' politeness strategies was also assessed by eight L1 English readers² who indicated what positively/negatively influenced their reactions (Step 5). Reexamining this corpus and its assessment through the lens of indexicality provides an opportunity to verify whether the thought-style indexes identified through sociohistorical analysis have ongoing and concrete sociocognitive relevance for genre users. The analysis thus addresses RQ2 ('how do writers draw on L1 indexes when writing for an international audience') and RQ3 ('how do international readers from a different culture react to them?').

Results and discussion

Feudal rank in the Old Régime: Basis for formal language possibilities

Unquestionably, the concepts of freedom, honor, nobility and distinction have acted as cornerstones of French social organization since feudal times (D'Iribarne, 1989; 2006). By tracing them through a close reading of historical texts, D'Iribarne argues that thought-styles under the Old Régime drew on the feudal vestiges of French society. The division of feudal French society into three distinct orders —nobility, clergy, and the third estate (serfs), each of which possessed their own set of rights and obligations— constituted a collectively imagined understanding of society forged from a feudal regime organized in terms of "bonds of personal subordination that lasted a lifetime" (D'Iribarne, 2006, p. 48). Under this organization, "[t]he count was the king's man, just as the serf was the village lord's" (Bloch, 1939, in D'Iribarne, 2006, p. 48)³. Subordination to a hierarchical superior was present at all levels of society as demonstrated by behavioral displays of submission: serfs

2 All readers were experienced application letter evaluators, either as teachers or recruitment officers.

3 Several sources used for this study were published in French. In translating, I attempted to preserve the original as much as possible, at the risk of making the English translation seem ungrammatical or awkward.

were bound to their lords through a life of servitude, while lords were bound to the king, albeit as ‘free’ men (i.e., vassals). Vassals demonstrated dependency by rendering services (armed service, command roles, administrative functions) in accordance with the nature of their fiefdom, and as such were “subject only to those obligations worthy of a perfectly free man” (Bloch, 1939, in D’Iribarne, 2006, p. 48), i.e., activities worthy of their station. In this regard, vassals’ dependence was considered honorable, which allowed them to conceive of themselves as a community of equals, a united nobility sharing ‘purity of blood’ distinguishing them from their lower-ranked dependents. D’Iribarne identifies this hierarchical organization with its honorable show of dependency as the basis for a “conception of greatness peculiar to a caste attached to its rank, which feels any request to perform actions unworthy of it as an unbearable infringement” (D’Iribarne, 2006, p. 49).

The formal language possibilities used to display such deferential thought-styles are characterized by Held (1999) as ‘gestures of submission,’ i.e., “any type of self-withdrawal, self-denigration and personal submission in favour of the interactional partner, which a polite individual is constrained to perform for social-ethical reasons” (Held, 1999, p. 21). Echoing D’Iribarne, she situates the emergence of gestures of submission within the courtly feudal system, which required that one pay homage to hierarchical status relationships. Such gestures, expressed in the grammar and lexis, were the “verbalised equivalents of bowing, cowering or kneeling before *alter*, who always has the higher status” (Held, 1999, p. 25). An example of deferential submission can be observed in the following excerpt of a letter sent in 1584 to King Henri III by the ‘sire of Saint-Gouard’ (Anticono, 2016, p. 11):

... suyvant **ce qu’il luy (au roi) plaist** de me commander **je ne faudray de me rendre au plutost que je pourray à ses piedz pour embrasser de toute la force de ma vie** ses royalz commandementz, **n’ayant autre desir ne volonté que de l’employer** et achepver à luy faire **tres humble service...**⁴

4 “... following what it pleases him (the king) to command me I can only render myself as soon as I am able to his feet to embrace with all the strength of my life his royal commandments, having no other desire or will than to employ it and achieve in doing for him this very humble service...”

Such elaborate dependency structures can be understood to index “a cult of distinction, bound more and more firmly to social rank, at the centre of which we find ‘polished’ forms, rigid etiquette and ceremonious play-acting” (Held, 1999, p. 25).

The French Revolution and rise of contextual *inappropriateness*

Dependency, subordination and submission to hierarchy were, however, radically challenged in France from 1789-1799 during the French Revolution and First Republic. The egalitarian and universalist ideals championed during this period ran counter to demonstrations of deference and submission towards nobles. However, while the nobility clearly came under attack as a social category, indicating a shift toward contextual *inappropriateness*, it is noteworthy that its associated characteristics —nobility, honor, elevation of self— continued to be valued and even revered as a “quality of being” (D’Iribarne, 2006, p. 37). Many sought to extend such values to the former serfs, who through the rights of citizenship granted under the First Republic could adopt “the nobleman’s honorable position... traits that were hitherto the prerogative of the nobility: [be] treated with the respect due to rank, never forced to abase oneself before anyone” (Sieyès, 1789, in D’Iribarne, 2006, p. 37). To allow commoners to escape the servitude historically imposed upon them, Sieyès and others argued it was necessary to either “lower the nobility, bringing them down to the level of commoners to eliminate all reference to a form of greatness likely humiliating for those who do not possess it, or, to the contrary, ennoble the third estate, allowing them to take on the garb and place of their former masters” (Sieyès, in D’Iribarne, 2006, p. 39). Eliminating the privilege granted by noble birth would “make all radically equal: One is not free by privilege, but by the rights of citizenship, rights which belong to all” (Sieyès, in D’Iribarne, 2006, p. 43).

So while being a nobleman had become socially inappropriate, the qualities associated with nobility continued to reverberate throughout French society. The idea that transferring noble qualities to commoners was a worthy endeavor was a frequent theme not only in Sieyès, but also later in Constant’s *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes* (1819) and in Tocqueville’s *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1840/1981) and *L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (1856). D’Iribarne

(2006, pp. 41-43) highlights how throughout Tocqueville's writing the opposition between 'great, noble, that which elevates, honors' and 'low, vile, that which demeans, degrades' was a fundamental reference point. To counter the former serf's dishonorable condition, aristocratic values of nobility and honor were to be bestowed upon all free men as a right of citizenship, rather than remain a privilege of hierarchical rank conferred at birth (D'Iribarne, 2006, p. 40). Possessing political equality thus came to be equated with participating in a collective nobility (D'Iribarne, 2006, p. 52) reaffirmed by a shared ethics of honor (D'Iribarne, 1989, p. 80).

Contextual appropriateness: Ritualized gestures of submission in French

It took nearly 100 years for these ideals to stabilize and permeate throughout French society. Various sources (D'Iribarne, 1989; 2006; Fisher, 1997; Jolibert, 2002) underscore the central role played by French public schools after 1870 in transmitting the norms of 'honorable and noble behavior' to younger generations. Fisher (1997), for example, describes how these values were codified as politeness norms in directives issued by the Ministry of Education; they appeared widely in teacher training manuals and curricula, and in inspector and teaching reports maintained in Department of Public Instruction archives: "Teaching politeness was seen as an integral part of moral education [and] manuals of good manners were adopted for use in civics and morals classes" (Fisher, 1997, p. 41). It thus became the public schools' prerogative to teach children deference, honor and nobility, showing them "how to behave, speak [and] keep quiet, show dignity, tact, and perhaps even good taste" (Pécaut, 1882, in Fisher, 1997, p. 47). The lesson conveyed was that to be French, one must be polite: "For us French, being polite is almost a national duty" (Mayaud, 1908, in Fisher, 1997, p. 47). Politeness was portrayed as "the natural prerogative of the French character: it is a racial virtue" (De la Fère, 1882, in Fisher, 1997, p. 44).

Politeness manuals were not the sole purview of public schools but also circulated widely amongst the general public during the late 1800's. As such, they informed recommendations for polite letter writing:

Politeness in letter writing ... is an obligation for all: there are formulas for addressing members of high society [which] like the law, it is forbidden to ignore. [...] One's rank, age, sex, position, and degree of intimacy determine the appropriate greeting. Consideration is for a superior, respect for an inferior... : *'I am, with the deepest respect... the most faithful, most obedient and most humble servant and subject.'* (Burani, 1879, pp. 125-128)⁵.

The italicized text in this excerpt underscores then-current expectations about polite behavior mediated by language with its connotations of honor, nobility and deference.

In her diachronic study of politeness devices in French, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2011, p. 139) identifies such linguistic expressions as 'face-flattery', or the embodiment of "an extremely refined and ceremonious politeness" in French culture. She argues that these culture-specific linguistic devices represent a much-needed addition to Brown and Levinson's (1987) universal politeness theory. Echoing key findings by D'Iribarne (1989; 2006) and others, she observes that for French speakers, such devices communicate "a set of precepts that should be adopted towards one's superiors and subordinates. The 'point of honour' consists above all of correctly marking status and of respecting hierarchies" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2011, p. 139). Similarly, Held (1999) makes a compelling case for the persistence of complex feudal forms of politeness in French letter writing conventions, indexed as elaborate respect rituals, or 'gestures of submission' (GSs). On the basis of her comparison of past letter writing strategies versus those of contemporary educated French speakers, Held (1999) argues that traditional forms of 'paying respect to rank' have by no means become antiquated. Today, however, respect is paid less to social status than to individuals in specific situational circumstances, with the effect being that GSs mark both the respect paid towards one's superiors and vice-versa. Held (1999) calls this a "multi-levelled, sociogenic process of redistribution" (p. 24) governed by several levels of transfer: from the powerful to the powerless, from social rank to social value, and from self-preservation to self-representation.

5 Je suis avec le plus profond respect ... le très fidèle, très obéissant et très humble serviteur et sujet.

Held shows how ritualized GSs are used as politeness indexes in contemporary letter writing practices by the powerful and less powerful alike, who each negotiate the exact formulation of politeness according to hierarchical rank. The complexity of this negotiation can be observed, for example, in recent politeness recommendations given for writing business letters: “When addressing a superior or a client, the politeness formula must be formal and express the respect you have for your interlocutor. Avoid all formulae that are too short, which may indicate a lack of consideration to the recipient, e.g., *Please accept, Madam, Sir, the expression of my deepest respect*” (Le Roux, 2021)⁶.

In particular, Held (1999, p. 28) has singled out the acts of requesting (R) and thanking (T) as two areas in which ritualized GSs appear to persist in contemporary French letter writing practices. Because ‘R’ requires writers to impose upon readers, it utilizes subtle verbal counter-measures to minimize the impoliteness. This is achieved through ‘T’, which allows the writer to restore the balance by gifting the reader with polite deference. It is noteworthy that in French, ‘T’ in such instances does not necessarily include the word ‘thank’ but may instead function as the pragmatic equivalent of dependency and submission used to restore the balance of power. Held identifies a number of GS forms associated with R which serve to counter impoliteness, including markers of indeterminacy (*‘il y a un certain’*), diminutive processes (*‘un peu’*), epistemological hedges (*‘il me semble que...’*), toning down the degree of validity (*‘il se peut que ce soit’*), or pretending not to know (*‘je ne sais pas de quoi il s’agit’*). Similarly, she found various GS forms to be associated with T, including evidence of dependency (*Je (vous) suis très obligé. / Soyez certain que je vous suis redevable*) and expressions of confusion, regret or inability to reciprocate. Held has observed these acts’ codification in letter-closing structures, in which “the semantic features of submission are in the forefront of this ‘disarming’ function” (Held, 1999, p. 32). The function of ‘T’ indexes includes the writer “admit[ting] her/his intrusion and thus submissively tak[ing] over the full responsibility for her/his action”. Likewise, the writer preemptively demonstrates grati-

6 Veuillez agréer, Madame, Monsieur, l’expression de mon profond respect.

tude by expressing dependency toward the reader, in anticipation of the gift of having the request accepted (Held, 1999).

Attesting politeness indexes in current French job application letters

A small corpus ($n = 4$) of recent job application letters in French illustrates the subsistence of GS structures today, with their attendant undertones of honor, submission and restraint toward the reader. The following excerpts identify these structures in letter closings. Interview requests ('R') are indicated in bold-face; gifts of honorable deference and evidence of dependency ('T') are shown in italics:

ex-1 *En restant à votre disposition pour tout entretien que vous jugerez nécessaire, veuillez agréer, Madame, Monsieur, mes salutations respectueuses*⁷.

ex-2 *Je vous remercie de prendre ma candidature en considération. Dans l'attente de votre réponse, je vous prie, Madame, Monsieur, de bien vouloir recevoir mes plus respectueuses salutations*⁸.

ex-3 *Je vous remercie de l'attention que vous voudrez bien porter à l'examen de mon dossier et reste à votre entière disposition pour toute information complémentaire ou rendez-vous qu'il vous conviendra de me proposer. Dans l'attente de ce contact, veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l'expression de mes salutations distinguées*⁹.

ex-4 *Je serai heureux que ma candidature ait su vous convaincre et me permette de vous rencontrer lors d'un entretien à votre convenance. Dans cette perspective, je vous saurai gré, Monsieur, Madame, d'accepter mes respectueuses salutations*¹⁰.

7 While remaining at your disposal for any interview you will deem necessary, may you desire to agree, Madam, Sir, to my respectful salutations.

8 I thank you for taking my application into consideration. In the wait for your response, I pray, Madam, Sir, for you to want to receive my most respectful salutations.

9 I thank you for the attention you will give to the examination of my application and remain at your entire disposal for any additional information or appointment that is convenient for you to propose. In the wait for this contact, may you desire to agree, Sir, to the expression of my distinguished salutations.

10 I will be happy if my application has known how to convince you and would allow me to meet you during an interview at your convenience. In this perspective, I leave to your discretion, Sir, Madam, whether to accept my respectful salutations.

In these letter excerpts, writers do not request an interview explicitly but hint at it, embedding their request within pre-emptive expressions of dependency (ex-1) or thanking (ex2-3). Such strategies allow the reader to propose —or refuse— an interview. Similarly, deference is given to the reader's (i.e., recruiter's) higher rank (ex-1: '*que vous jugerez nécessaire*'; ex-3: '*je reste à votre [entière] disposition*') using a temporality which shows the writer as waiting on the reader (ex2-3: '*Dans l'attente de*'; ex-4: '*Dans cette perspective*'). Moreover, writers often formulate the tacit interview request as reader-oriented ('*votre attention*', '*une réponse de votre part*', '*à votre convenance*', '*que vous voudrez bien porter*'). If the writer makes the request more explicit ('*rendez-vous*'), the risk of this imposition is immediately mitigated by an appropriately submissive turn (ex-3: '*qu'il vous conviendra de me proposer*'). Finally, closing ritual elements of social dependency and submission are obligatory ('*veuillez agréer mes salutations respectueuses*', '*je vous prie de bien vouloir recevoir mes plus respectueuses salutations*', '*je vous saurai gré d'accepter mes respectueuses salutations*').

The general impression thus conveyed is that writers place themselves in a position of social dependency and inferiority, leaving up-take entirely up to the readers who are deferentially positioned as higher-ranking. Such highly elaborate deference strategies, guided by the need to 'flatter' the reader's face (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2011), aligned with the self-denigrating and gestures of submission described by Held (1999), appear to perpetuate the code of deference, honor and nobility associated with feudal thought-styles (D'Iribarne 1989; 2006). Having recourse to such sociocultural indexes when writing job application letters reinforces the French L1 reader's space to the detriment of the writer's, with the intended purpose of obtaining a favorable response to the interview request.

Although many L1 French speakers consider them obsolete, such ritualistic gestures of submission are still very much expected by job recruiters because they are associated with a politeness predicated on shared thought-styles (D'Iribarne 1989; 2006). As discussed in the next section, the indexical nature of language can make it challenging for L1 French writers to produce job application letters in another language and to identify the implicit reasoning behind their language choices, which can be at odds with their readers' expectations.

Ascertaining indexical and sociocognitive reality

L1 French students' application letters in English

To examine how L1 French writers reproduce these cultural-specific indexes when writing in English, this section revisits results from a previous study (Dressen-Hammouda, 2013). Following Upton and Connor (2001), the lexico-grammatical analysis of a corpus ($n = 69$) of English-language application letters by L1 French writers focused on letter endings, specifically Move 4 (interview request) and Move 5 (thanking the reader). While Upton and Connor (2001) originally coded for seven moves in the application letter, in Dressen-Hammouda (2013) an additional move not present in Upton and Connor's data (Table 1) was identified. Given its frequency (75.4%) and strict formulaic-like homogeneity, 'bringing closure' (Move 8) was considered at the time to have particular meaning for L1 French writers. A small handful of writers (5.8%) even closed directly with this move, skipping Moves 4-7 entirely. In retrospect, this move can be understood as an attempt to demonstrate ritualized deference, e.g., 'I wait to hear from you' (L-67); 'I can travel in North Brunswick for an interview, it is really not a problem' (L-36); or 'I am waiting for a meeting with you, I will travel to New Jersey if you offer me the opportunity' (L-68).

Table 1.
Ending moves in application letters

1. Identify the source of information (Explain how and where you learned of the position).
2. Apply for the position (State desire for consideration).
3. Provide argument, including supporting information, for the job application.
 - a. Implicit argument based on neutral evidence or information about background and experience.
 - b. Argument based on what would be good for the hiring company ('My intercultural training will be an asset to your international negotiations team').
 - c. Argument based on what would be good for the applicant ('This job will give me the opportunity to test my intercultural training').
4. Indicate desire for an interview or a desire for further contact, or specify means of further communication/how to be contacted.
5. Express politeness (pleasantries) or appreciation at the end of the letter.
6. Offer to provide more information.
7. Reference attached résumé.
8. Bring closure.

Source: Adapted from Upton & Connor (2001, p. 318).

The 2013 study reported that while ‘requesting an interview’ (Move 4) was a frequent strategy (69.6%), ‘thanking the reader’ was less so (33.3%). According to Upton and Connor (2001), L1 English readers would expect a show of appreciation and thanks to balance the potential imposition of the request on readers. However, an overwhelming majority (75.3%) of L1 French writers did not find it necessary to thank the reader explicitly. The avoidance of other expected forms of politeness in English was similarly noted: only 33 participants used the word ‘please’ (47.8%) and just 12 (17.4%) used some form of modality to soften interview requests. Students’ lack of knowledge about the indexical nature of French and English-language politeness structures thus seemed to lead several of them to produce writing perceived by L1 English readers as grammatically correct but impolite, as discussed below.

In response to RQ2, L1 French writers do indeed appear to draw on French politeness indexes (i.e., gestures of submission) when writing job application letters in English.

L1 English readers’ evaluation of L1 French student writing

Further evidence was sought that these strategies could be misconstrued by international readers who do not share the same cultural background as the writers (RQ3). In Dressen-Hammouda (2013), eight L1 English evaluators were asked to assess the effectiveness of the application letters’ politeness in letter endings (Moves 4-8, Table 1). Evaluators reported which words had a positive or negative impact, and rated letter endings on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = *most positive*, 5 = *most negative*). Based on these evaluations, the letter endings were ranked 1-to-69, with L-69 receiving the lowest politeness score.

In the present analysis, the negatively-rated words and expressions originally commented upon by the evaluators were targeted as potential indexes of French politeness strategies. As described above, such indexes include (1) not requesting an interview explicitly but hinting at it by embedding the request within a pre-emptive expression of dependency; (2) giving deference to the reader’s higher status by putting oneself at the reader’s disposal, letting them decide, or indicating a willingness to wait for further uptake; (3) grammatically highlighting the reader in noun and verb phrases; and (4) using specific formulaic mitigators and softeners if the request is too explicit.

As shown in Dressen-Hammouda (2013), evaluators observed that while the letter endings were grammatically correct, they often found the writers' positioning strategies pragmatically incorrect. They identified phrasing to be expected in English-language application letters but whose non-idiomatic delivery was often perceived as invasive (L-37, L-58). Revisiting this issue through the lens of indexicality, what the L1 English evaluators perceived as invasive can be observed as L1 French writers trying to downplay their own position so as to elevate that of the reader ('giving deference'):

L-37: You can find, with this e-mail, my CV. I hope I will be hearing from you.

L-58: If my application interests you, please call me on my phone number [...]

Furthermore, evaluators also commented that the non-idiomatic phrasing was both obvious and unnecessary (L-52, L-64). In many respects, however, the phrasing once again reflects L1 French politeness norms: putting oneself at the reader's disposal and allowing the reader space to decide whether an interview is warranted (*'I am available according to your disponibilities', 'If it's necessary I could travel'*), and mitigating explicit interview requests through elaborate expressions of dependency (*'an interview which will enable you to judge my motivation', 'an appointment in the case that an interview is required'*):

L-52: I am available according to your disponibilities [sic] for an interview which will enable you to judge my motivation. I look forward to hearing from you.

L-64: If it's necessary I could travel to have an appointment in the case that an interview is required. I have enclosed my CV for having more details about my professional life.

Similarly, evaluators considered that writers sometimes appeared unprofessional, alternatively coming off as over-interested or insufficiently so (L-36, L-47, L-60). In these cases, writers can be observed as attempting to deferentially place themselves at the readers' service (*'it is really not a problem', 'will help you to translate data in whatever languages', 'whenever and wherever you want (even in Munich)'*):

L-36: I can travel in North Brunswick for an interview, it is really not a problem. I am looking forward to hearing from you.

L-47: I will enjoy working for your services and will help you to translate data in whatever languages. I look forward to hearing from you.

L-60: I am available for an interview whenever and wherever you want (even in Munich). I will call your secretary at the end of the week for news about my request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Finally, signaling a desire to wait for the reader's uptake (L-28, L-67, L-68) was considered presumptuous and provoked some of the most negative reactions by evaluators:

L-28: Please find enclosed my up-to-date CV. *I am waiting for the opportunity to meet you.* Thanks for your consideration.

L-67: *I wait to hear from you.*

L-68: Please find an up-to-date CV for your consideration. *I am waiting for a meeting with you,* I will travel to New Jersey if you offer me the opportunity.

The foregoing analysis confirms that less experienced L1 French writers tend to draw on culture-specific L1 indexical resources when writing in English (RQ2). The resources' indexical meaning, however, is not immediately clear to L1 English readers who misconstrue as invasive, pompous, and unnecessary the historically-grounded cultural obligations of paying respect and honoring social rank through ritualized submissive gestures (RQ3). As sociocultural instances of "discourse in place" (Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2003), the implicit indexical value of L1 French gestures of submission is not only concealed to non-French speakers but can also be detrimental in cases of asymmetrical social interaction.

Conclusion

Using indexical analysis, this paper has sought to identify how French politeness norms are indexed in job application letters in English by L1 French writers. In response to RQ1, it aimed to demonstrate how indexical analysis can be used to identify politeness indexes, to explore how L1 French writers may draw on L1 indexical resources when

writing for an international audience, and to consider how such indexes may be interpreted by readers from other cultures who draw on their own L1 indexes. The study found that although the letters were considered correct grammatically-speaking, divergences in terms of where and how politeness was expressed caused some application letters to be judged as impolite because the expression of politeness was at odds with expectations by L1 English speakers. Starting from the long-acknowledged premise that violations of polite behavior occur not because international writers are unable to understand that there are norms to be respected (Okamura & Shaw, 2000) but because appropriately performing politeness in another language can be exceedingly difficult, this paper has proposed a new angle for understanding the underlying reasons for these difficulties. To do so, the study traced the sociohistorical development of the thought-styles associated with polite behavior in France, focusing on the concepts of nobility, honor and distinction. It showed how these concepts crystallized as linguistic devices during feudal times, characterized as gestures of submission (Held, 1999) and face-flattery (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2011). It further discussed how the concepts' (in)appropriateness shifted over time, leading to their indexicalization as implicit politeness practices. Indexes of French politeness remain common in letter writing practices today, including in job application letters. Evidence that L1 French students chose strategies drawing on their L1 indexes was apparent in their approach to writing job application letters in English. Their politeness strategies, based on feudal French notions of deference, honor and nobility, were not however recognized as polite behavior by L1 English readers. Instead, the readers interpreted indexes of French politeness as invasive and presumptuous, or as overly formal and unnecessary verbiage. Such miscues can potentially have a prejudicial effect on such writers' employment opportunities abroad.

This study underscores the importance of revealing the local indexes of situated writing with three aims: (1) helping international writers develop more conscious awareness of the unspoken norms that organize their thoughts and attitudes as they write; (2) demonstrating how seemingly simple communicative situations (e.g., politeness; job application letters) differ in familiar genres written across languages; (3) supporting teachers, evaluators and journal reviewers in better

formulating why writing by speakers of other languages sometimes seems to not ‘meet expectations.’ It further supports the observation that indexical analysis’ potential for writing research stems from its capacity to capture the broad impressions about sociocultural identity and legitimacy implicitly conveyed through writing, including social background, professional identity, cultural identity, affective and epistemological positioning, gender, and ethnic background. Finally, it helps frame understandings about why becoming a legitimate writer in a community entails gaining tacit knowledge and visible skill in orchestrating that knowledge through indexicality, especially because readers from other cultures risk misconstruing a writer’s sociocultural identity by forming negative impressions about relative power, standing and agency.

This study is limited by the challenges involved in providing a full accounting of the complex basis for indexicality. One can, at best, provide a glimpse of the web of factors that come into play in how a community constructs its tacitly shared conceptual space, and how that space is mediated through language. By attempting to include the most compelling attributes within space constraints, the analyst invariably runs the risk of trying to tell a good story while risking oversimplification. Additionally, the results would have been better triangulated by seeking further insight from L1 French speakers about the ongoing impact of the identified politeness indexes on their writing, both in French and in any additional languages they use, like English. Moreover, a comparative study of thought-styles associated with politeness conventions and indexes across varieties of English could have provided an interesting counterpoint. Ultimately, coming back to Geertz, one can only aim to “draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts, to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics” (Geertz, 1973, p. 321).

Finally, the results reported here raise an issue not yet addressed in the literature: why did this study’s participants not rely even more on L1 politeness indexes, at the risk of ‘transliterating’ their thoughts? Indeed, while many of the students’ job application letters did not adhere to the expected norms of politeness in English, neither did they completely abide by expectations for politeness in French. Several writers see-

med, in this sense, to have momentarily ‘forgotten’ how to be polite. A hypothesis explaining this observation builds on a well-known concept: just as second-language learners are considered to construct an inter-language, i.e., the current version of the language being learned which incorporates aspects of the first language (Selinker, 1972; Tarone, 1983), it seems likely that they also construct an ‘inter-indexicality’, an idiosyncratic conceptual space in which learners are neither entirely within the frame of neither the first or second culture. Inter-indexicality is a fluctuating ‘in-between’ space where learners confront and work out what it means to shift between socio-cultural language contexts, what can be said explicitly and what is implied. Exploring inter-indexicality could be an interesting avenue for future L2 writing research.

In conclusion, this paper has endeavored to explore some of the implications of indexicality for international writers and its impact on their ability to negotiate their positions through writing. By providing a guiding frame for a diverse range of social, cognitive and language phenomena such as shared background knowledge, cognitive frame, implicitness, micro-macro, voice, register, metadiscourse, evaluation, stance and engagement, indexical analysis is arguably an essential contributor to research on writing for international audiences.

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Appendix

Sources used to constitute the small corpus of French job application letters

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