

Politeness Ideology in Thai Computer-mediated Communication

Krisadawan Hongladarom and Soraj Hongladarom

1. Introduction

The Internet has become a worldwide phenomenon. Many countries are racing to embrace it, believing that it will bring in many benefits. Thailand is becoming increasingly wired. Currently there are approximately 600,000 Internet users in the country. The government is convinced that the Internet will serve as a gateway toward greater prosperity, and as a result a lot of money has been invested in expanding the infrastructure.

At present there are a number of web sites which act as hosts for these virtual communities.¹ Of these perhaps *pantip.com* (<http://www.pantip.com/>) is the most popular. Created a little more than three years ago, the web site is attracting thousands of visitors. Most participants—ranging from teenagers to the working middle class—take part in the fourteen different discussion "tables" to talk about a variety of topics such as science, mathematics, politics, health, entertainment, and pet care.

The existence of such computer-mediated communities naturally raises the question of how culture will be affected by these new advances. Investigating the interplay among language, culture, and ideology, this paper aims at showing that computer-mediated communication (CMC) plays an instrumental role in the change of Thai culture. However, this change is not entirely passive. Thais strategically use language as a measure to counteract and maintain their identity. This resiliency of Thai culture appears to reflect Soraj Hongladarom's (1999) "thick" and "thin" conception in making sense of the tension between the global and the local in CMC.

Prevailing wisdom regarding CMC and culture seems to be that it tends to make all the world's cultures the same. This paper, however, will take a critical look at this issue, focusing on politeness strategies in Thai CMC in order to find out about the following questions: What is the nature of politeness

in Thai CMC? How is Thai culture affected by the rising use of CMC and how this affection can be seen in the usage of linguistic politeness? Finally, how does this affection tell us about some of the theories of CMC, politeness and culture?

We looked at a number of computer-mediated texts at various discussion tables at *pantip.com*, and found that the Thai members of this community show a significant amount of politeness toward one another. This is rather surprising given that CMC usually entails a greater chance for impoliteness to occur. 'Flaming' is a well-known phenomenon in this genre. Perhaps this is due to the guiding hands of the moderator and the web master. However, it appears that most participants prefer things to be this way, as they are active in reporting messages that violate the rules to the web master. Politeness, therefore, appears to be consciously maintained. It is, as Gino Eelen argues, a part of social reality which is consciously built up and maintained through interaction among human beings (Eelen 2001: 245-247).

In this paper we begin by offering a discussion of the various theories of politeness, and relevant works, particularly those dealing with CMC. Then we present the data and offer our analysis of them. We will try to show that there is a sense in which the universalist and particularistic tendencies in looking at politeness can be reconciled, and politeness, as a means by which a group maintains their solidarity, exists simultaneously at both levels.

2. Theoretical Construction of Politeness

There is the notion of politeness among the common people, who are engaged in their everyday business and counter polite or impolite interactions. To these people politeness is what they find pleasing, or what they find in manner rulebooks. On the other hand, the notion has become a technical one, a subject of scholarly debates. Watts, Ide and Ehlich (1992) have called this 'first order' and 'second order' politeness respectively. Ideally the two notions should be able to merge into one, as the subject studied should reflect what is going on in the real world of human interaction. However, as the technicality of the investigation increases, there are chances that the two notions do not necessarily reflect each other.

The tendency for empirical description and theoretical idealization to branch out is a case in point for politeness research. The empirical description focuses on what people actually do when they are polite to one another, and what they take politeness to be. The theoretical idealization (e.g., Lakoff, 1973; Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987; Meier, 1995; Arundale, 1999) aims largely at comprehending the situation, proposing models with which one could gain a general insight, which would be supported by the real, empirical data. Ideally there should be a balance between the theorization and the empirical data. That is, the theory should fit the data perfectly. However, the perfect fit is itself a theoretical construction, as no theory could ever fit all the possible data perfectly. If it did, it would just cease to be a *theory*. Nevertheless, the theory cannot be too remote from the data, for what we are now doing is to investigate politeness as it actually appears in real human interaction, not as an idle game of speculation. The requirement is only that the theory be adequate to the data involved.

The reason why we have discussed the role and distinction between theory and data here is that, as 'politeness' can be both common sense and theoretical notion, one is likely, if one is unaware, to confuse between the two (Held, 1992). Either one is describing what one already takes to be politeness in the data, or one is theorizing on what politeness should actually be, based on what one takes politeness to be a priori. The common example in Thai of performing formal behaviors to one's friends, using 'high' language, only to be interpreted as being utterly impolite shows that the definition of politeness is a contested matter.² Furthermore, Brown and Levinson's "model person" is also a theoretical construction, and as such this notion is liable to criticism that the "model person" represents a Western perspective and way of talking (Ide, 1989). As Kienpointner (1999) points out, politeness appears to reflect an ideology, and so do the various current theories of politeness.³

3. Politeness in Computer-Mediated Communication

As the Internet and CMC are becoming a fact of life, politeness theories need to be reevaluated as to their adequacy for this new medium. One of the most salient aspects of CMC is the fact that participants usually lack cues through which mistakes in understandings could be minimized. Most forms of CMC,

especially the most popular ones such as e-mails and bulletin boards, are text-based.⁴ Though there are more advanced technologies which have ameliorated the situation by enabling large graphics and sounds to be transmitted, the practice is still not widespread and requires a large amount of resources. Thus, the study of politeness in CMC at present is limited to what is there in the texts themselves.

Herring (1996) studied gender differences in CMC in the US, and found that females are more geared toward maintaining positive politeness, whereas males are more attuned to the adversarial or anarchistic nature of the medium. Both groups, moreover, appear to be roughly equal in terms of maintaining negative politeness. Herring's findings appear to reflect the cultural bias of the US. If one agrees that politeness is itself an ideology, then Herring's findings seem to be circumscribed by contemporary American culture. Simmons (1999) agrees with Herring in that negative politeness appears to be maintained in American CMC. He argues that list moderators play a crucial role in creating the identity of the list (Simmons, 1999: 540).⁵

Both works show that, although CMC is an "impoverished" medium, there exists at least a level of politeness, and that negative politeness is to be found more often than its positive counterpart. More recently, Ulla Bunz and Scott Campbell have shown that e-mail messages that contain politeness indicators are more likely to elicit polite responses (Bunz and Campbell 2002). However, the data for these findings are all based on discussions by Americans. This is understandable because Americans have dominated the Internet to a very large extent, and it is only recently that other countries have come to the scene. Thus, any theoretical constructions on CMC have so far been based on assumptions and values of American culture. Hence data from CMC in other languages and obtained from cultures different from the American one are necessary if one is to found a universal theory on CMC politeness.

4. 'Netiquettes' at *Pantip.com*

As politeness is traditionally linked to social norms or etiquettes, it is fitting to examine politeness in cyberspace through their counterparts, or the "netiquettes." *Pantip.com* also has its own set of netiquettes translated as follows:

1. Messages critical of the King and his royal family are absolutely prohibited.
 2. Do not post messages which contain foul language and sexually explicit content.
 3. Do not post messages which are intended to cause a person to be insulted, hated by others without citing a clear source of reference.
 4. Do not post messages which are challenging or inciting, with the intention of causing quarrels or chaos on this web site, whereas the source of these quarrels or chaos is not due to free expression of opinions by a self respecting person.
 5. Do not post messages which attack or criticize in a negative way any religions or the teachings of any religion.
 6. Do not use pseudonyms which resemble somebody else's real name with the intention of misleading others to think that the original owner of the name will be damaged or lose his or her reputation.
 7. Do not post messages which might cause conflicts among educational institutions.
 8. Do not post messages containing the personal data of others, such as pager number, e-mail addresses or telephone numbers, with the intention of causing troubles to the owner of the data. Posting of pager number is especially prohibited, since this is the easiest way for others to cause troubles.
- (Source: http://pantip.inet.co.th/cafe/frame_rule.html)

Herring (1996: 132-137) finds that the netiquettes of an online group embody the cultures and values of that group. Hence it is quite clear that these eight netiquettes embody the culture and values of the *pantip.com* community. It is also clear that they embody the peculiarities or uniqueness of Thai culture. The first rule, the injunction against criticisms of the King and the royal family, is serious and strictly enforced. Since the King is always regarded with highest respect, this rule can be seen as a reflection of the value system of the Thai people. This obligatory rule may be regarded as an instance of 'discernment' operating in Thai culture. The second rule concerns what Thai people observe to be a level of civility one shows toward another. Refraining from foul language corresponds to what ordinary people call 'politeness.'

These netiquettes may be classified according to which kind of politeness each of them is enhancing. Rules 1 and 5 could be seen as reflections of the uniquely Thai culture and value system, and may perhaps be considered as part of the Thai politeness ideology. As Thais hold the King and Buddhism and other religions very high, politeness in this case naturally at least involves respecting these rules. Rule 2 also concerns the value system, as sex and foul language are not acceptable to most Thai participants. Rules 3, 4, 6 and 8 could be regarded as a means by which negative politeness is maintained. All of them are related to not violating the private space of others in one way or another. Rule 7 reflects the peculiar Thai situation. Most Thai surfers are young and they are still in high schools or colleges. The students are so strongly attached to their schools or colleges to the extent that arguments and disagreements concerning educational institutions can flare up and become violent rather easily.

The emphasis on the content, whether it is the monarchy, religion, school, or sex, shows that the notion 'politeness' should not only be limited to linguistic forms and strategies but include topics of talks which are generally considered polite in the discourse community. What is considered polite is what is not contradictory to what people believe. To criticize the King is considered impolite in Thai culture no matter how attenuated or how mitigated one's talk is. One positive strategy posited by Brown and Levinson—pay notices to the hearer's needs, wants, attentions, and interests—is indeed essential in Thai culture.

5. Politeness in *Pantip.com*

As mentioned earlier, our data are drawn from discussion tables at *pantip.com*. The one we are most interested in is *Waakor* Table, which raises a number of more serious issues dealing with problems about science, life, politics, and religions. The reason we pay a special attention to this table is because its contributions are substantial, and as it is a forum for serious topics, it is interesting to see how participants criticize one another. The table works by an interested writer posing a *krathuu* 'question' or 'discussion point' to the table. Each *krathuu* is in form of a short question, or a short statement, followed by an explanation. Some *krathuus* are short-lived; they attract only one response or no response at all. Interestingly, successful *krathuus* such as (1) drew as many as 42 interactions lasting for four consecutive days. (The Thai data are omitted here for brevity.)

(1)

Does Buddhism teach "irrationality"?

The topic sure attracts a lot of interest, doesn't it? (laugh)

Buddhism teaches that everyone was born to pay for their past karmas and to create new ones. There are both good karmas and bad ones. These karmas are the reasons why we were born into the condition we are in today. If the causes (heet) made by us are good, then we receive good effects (phon) ; but if the causes are bad, then we get bad things. However it is, our cycles are only limited to creating causes and getting effects and creating new causes again. What do we have to do to stop rebirths? To do that we need to understand the causes, the causes that we make because we are deluded into thinking that they are good. We are deluded into believing that the world and our emotions are real. When we truly understand the causes, when we understand that what we take to be ours—our selves, our husbands, our wives, our homes, are only our own constructions, then we will stop creating new causes. That is, we will stop the greed, anger, and delusion, because we will know that in reality there is absolutely nothing that is ours. When the mind is indifferent to the causes, then the effects will not happen. That person will then be released from the samsara. This is why I said that

Buddhism teaches us not to be "rational" actually "not to create the cycle of causes and effects") anymore.

Sip Et Luuk Maak Phyayom [27 October B.E. 2542 (1999) 19:24:32]

There are two characteristics with this post. First, it is exceptionally long. Second, it is ambiguous. The first characteristic does not seem to annoy participants.⁶ None of them commented on this issue. They all paid attention to the second point. The trouble lies in the use of the word *hèetphôn*. This word means 'reason' or 'rationality'; however, it is a compound consisting of two words, *hèet* 'cause' and *phôn* 'effect'. Thus when the raiser of this topic who carries a pseudonym Sip Et Luuk Maak Phyayom (hereafter SEL) said that Buddhism teaches us not to have *hèetphôn*, he is being ambiguous. What he should have meant is that Buddhism teaches us not to take hold of the relation between causes and effects.

The ambiguity leads to intense discussions. Many participants attack SEL for apparently insulting Buddhism.

(2)

- 1 phôm ?àan hũakhô khốṇ khũn lếew ṇṇṇ
lṇṇ
- 2 phṇṇ ?àan núa khwāam pāy lếew kṇ phóp
wāa sṇṇ thĩi khũn khít
mān tũun māk lṇṇ
- 3 thāa khũn bṇṇk wāa sṇṇ thĩi khũn khít pēn
phĩaṇ khwāam kít
- 4 lên lên phôm māk wāa
- 5 tềe thāa khũn kít bềp thĩi khĩen jṇṇ jṇṇ phôm
wāa khũn tṇṇ pāy ?àan phrá tripitaka sàk
rṇṇ lếew là
- 6 phôm chũa wāa khũn māk dāk tṇṇ kāan jà
phũut wāa sāsàṇṇ
- 7 khốṇ rāw māk mềe hềet phôn
- 8 tềe thĩi lṇṇ karuna rawaṇ kāan chái khām thĩi
hũa khṇ krathũu nṇi ná kháp

- 1 I read your *krathuu* and was amazed.
- 2 But when I finished I found that what you
thought was very shallow.
- 3 If you say that what you are thinking is only a
playful thing, then I won't say anything.
- 4 But if you really believe what you are writing
then I think you need to go back and read
the *Tripitaka* [the Buddhist canon].
- 5 I believe that you are not saying that our
religion is "irrational".
- 6 But please be careful of the wording in your
topic.

Templar - [27 Oct B.E. 2542 20:32:45]

It is quite obvious that SEL's *krathuu* is not intended as a troll, which is known in the Net community as incendiary messages posted on the board just to elicit heated responses and no serious exchanges of views and ideas. SEL appeared rather serious in his opinions. However, Templar (T) accused him for having shallow thought. He mitigated his remark by phrasing the comment in a if-clause: he could bear with the *krathuu* if SEL was not serious about what he thought. But it is interesting to note that SEL's message is not interpreted by any participants as violating to Rule 5 of the above mentioned netiquettes. T adds that he does not believe that SEL means what he apparently said.

(3)

- 1 hey ?aan hâi đĩ đĩ kòon phuân wâa
hèetphôn ?ân nĩ mảay
khwāam wâa ?ārāi thân hui hui
- 2 hèetphôn thĩi khĩen nĩ mải châi hèetphôn
- 3 tề pēn hèet phôn jêek kân
- 4 rĩak wâa cause and effect
- 5 phútsàsnả mải hèetphôn khuūu reason
- 6 tề mải sỏn hâi khôn mải cause and effecct

- 1 Hey, friend, read it carefully to see what
hèetphôn here means (laugh).
- 2 hèetphôn here is not 'reason' or 'rationality'.
- 3 But it is hèet (cause) and phôn (effect)
separately.
- 4 We call it cause and effect.
- 5 Buddhism has reasons.
- 6 But it teaches people not to have causes and
effects.
Sip Et Luuk Maak Phayayom - [27 Oct B.E. 2542
20:37:30]

Explaining what he really meant, SEL tried not to let the atmosphere become too heated. We can see this in the use of the injunction *hey*, a marker of surprise, in the opening of the message. He also addressed his addressee as a phuân 'friend'. This word can be used as a term of address when one talks to friends, apart from a wide range of pronominal devices available in the language.

In (2) T represents himself as phỏm, a general polite pronoun for men, and addresses his addressee as khũn, a polite counterpart of phỏm which can be used for both men and women. This pair of pronouns is most common in all discussion tables. This is not surprising, given that phỏm and khũn are the most useful pronouns when the speaker does not know the identity of the addressee. In general, such information as age, social status, degree of intimacy, and type of situation is needed in order to determine

which pronominal choice is appropriate. However, this information is utterly missing in mediated discourse.

In line 2 in (3) SEL calls T's attention by addressing him as *thân*, instead of *khūn*. *thân* or *thâan* is a formal second person pronoun, which can be used as either a singular or plural marker. It is mostly found in writing and is often used as an impersonal pronoun (for example, in addressing general readers or audiences). In conversation, it is employed as a term of reference when the speaker wants to refer to someone who is respectable. In (3) SEL manipulates the use of this pronoun. It is not used as a formal marker. Instead it indicates the speaker's playful mood and his attempt to befriend with the addressee but at the same time respects him.

Interestingly, we found that several contributors expressed their sympathies with SEL.

(4)

- 1 sǒŋsǎan jāaw khǒŋ kràthúu
 - 2 khǒn sùanmāak mǎi sǎmāat jàp khwāam
tèektàaŋ khǒŋ hētphǒn kàp hēt phǒn
sǒŋ khām nǐi khǒŋ khūn
 - 3 thǒn ?āw nǒi ná phūan
 - 4 yāŋŋāi kǝ dūu lēe lūuk màak khǒŋ tūa?ēŋ wái hǎi đīi là
- 1 I sympathize with the topic raiser.
2 Many people can't get hold of the differences between your two words: hētphǒn and hēt -phǒn .
3 Bear with it pal.
4 Anyway take a good care of your 'lūuk màak'.
Song [28 Oct B.E. 2542 - 00:03:55]

In (4) it is clear that Song is solacing SEL by mentioning that he feels sympathetic with him, and he asks the latter to be patient. He addresses SEL as a 'pal', thus emphasizing comradeship within the group. Moreover, his admonition for SEL to take care of his *lūuk màak* (prostate glands, which is part of his pseudonym mimicking the title of a Chinese movie) is a humorous one which lessens the impact of the disagreements and the verbal attacks being levelled against him.

(5)

- 1 mǎa ?āw jāi chūai khà thân phyayom
- 2 kùap cháí kām thǐi jètānāa hǎi khǒn ?ùn
sǎpsǒn mòd lēew nákhá
- 3 ?òtthǒn nǒi hǎe hǎe :) :))
- 4 tēe maya kǝ get tǎntēe ?àan páat rēek lǎi ná
khá
- 5 wāa khūn phyayom tǎn kràthúu lǝ pǎw nǐi

- ná
 6 léeu phō hēn phuān phuān sài kām yə yə
 7 yāŋ ʔēp sōŋsǎi lǎi wāa khǎw sài ʔāw sànu̯k
 sànu̯k
 8 sàndōŋ jètānāa khōn tām kràthúu
 thǎŋ thǎŋ thǎi rúu yūu léeu rúu plāw
 9 kō bāaŋkrāŋ maya kō thām ɲán ná hə hə.
- 1 (I) come to give you moral support, *Than*
Phyayom.
 2 You almost paid it all up for the karma which
 you intended to confuse other people.
 3 Be patient. (laugh) ;) :)
 4 But I (Maya) got it as soon as I first glanced at it
 that Khun Phyayom set up the krathuu to
 excite people.
 5 And then when I saw our friends attack him a
 lot,
 6 I thought to myself whether they attacked just
 for the fun of it,
 7 to respond to what the raiser of the krathuu
 wanted to see.
 8 I also did that too sometimes (laugh).
 Maya - [28 October B.E. 2542 13:16:02]

Similarly, Maya in (5) states clearly that she is writing to give SEL's moral support. What is striking in this example is how she addresses herself. She refers to herself using the first name, Maya. First names and nicknames in Thai are hardly used in formal situations and first encounters. That this writer opts to refer to herself as Maya is a clear indication that she does not consider SEL (and, we believe, other participants as well) a stranger.

There is a high sense of camaraderie in this web site. This is confirmed by the existence of such labels as *chaaw-pantip* and *chaaw-waakor*, constantly used among the participants and by the web master. The prefix *chaaw-* marks a group of people, as in the word *chaaw-thai* 'Thai people'. *Chaaw-waakor* may not know one another, and it is possible that they will never meet in life. Because of the varied backgrounds of Net users, the situation at *pantip.com* is not like academic discussion lists of which subscribers may get opportunities to meet at annual conferences.⁷ Thus, the fact that they are concerned about the other party's feelings is certainly surprising. We would expect long-term relationship to play an important role in determining how people should behave towards one another. However, we do not find it to be an instrumental factor here. Internet communities are "textually-mediated social life," to use Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1998) term. There is no social contract that obligates Net users to be very nice towards one another. They can attack one another's ideas baldly.

However, we found that the situation at this web site is contrary to the expectation. The participants perform various kinds of "face-balancing acts" to restore the state of equilibrium in the course of heated discussions. For example, they comfort and encourage the addressee, as we have seen in (4) and (5) above. They also resort to joking. This can be done by several strategies such as saying funny things, talking about something which is not relevant to the topic discussed, being playfully ironic, and using funny pseudonyms and smilies as well as laughter expressions. (6) - (7) demonstrate some of these joking strategies.

(6)

- 1 khâw jâi lên ná thâanlûukmàak
- 2 thâa mâi ?àan dūu đĩi đĩi nĩi lên ?ăw pùat
tòm lûuk màak mư̄an kăn
- 1 You know how to play, *thaanluukmaak* (Mr. Prostate Gland)
- 2 If we don't read (your *krathuu*) carefully,
perhaps we'll feel pain at our prostate glands.
Khon Chood (29 October B.E. 2542 01:23:39)

The comment in (6) that SEL's *krathuu*, if not read carefully, can cause prostate glands ache is meant to amuse the readers.

(7)

- 1 lên kàp mả mả lĩa pàak
- 2 bõorāan thāan wāa wái
- 3 ặặ mấ
- 1 You play with a dog, so he licks your mouth.
- 2 This is what old people say.
- 3 Are you confused?
Intreg (28 October B.E. 2542 11:06:51)

This is another example which shows how jokes operate in Thai CMC discourse. The writer of (7) quotes this proverb, which is not relevant to the topic discussed, which is about the incident when several police dogs bit tapioca farmers who were demonstrating in front of the Government House in October 1999. This writer knows that what he is saying is not relevant; that is why, he asks if the readers are confused (line 3). What he really meant is to say something funny.

Another face balancing act is that the participants often admit that they are simply kidding or are not serious about what they write or think (kít lên lên 'think playfully' or kít chài chài 'think plainly').

They are afraid that their discussants will get angry with them. This is clearly seen in (8).

(8)

- 1 sàsànnāa phút sùanyày phūut thūŋ
nāamàthām māk kwàa
- 2 thódsàchâat rāi nīa phrā phútthajāaw kòət
pēn sāt tàaŋ tàaŋ
- 3 pēn pāy dāy rŭi khráp
4. mŭian pēn rŭaŋ lāw fairy tail sa māk kwàa
- 5 phǒm wāa kŕit (christ) mīi hēetphon māk
thīi sūt léew khráp
- 6 ...uh...yàa phūŋ kròot kān ná
- 7 khêe ?òk khwām khít hēn chǎi chǎi

- 1 Buddhism talks more about abstract things.
- 2 Ten rebirths, what have them. Lord Buddha
was born as various forms of animals.
- 3 Is this possible?
- 4 Most people think that this is more like a
fairy tale.
- 5 In my opinion, Christianity is most rational.
- 6 Uh...Don't get angry with me.
- 7 I just expressed my view.
Thong (28 October 1999 02:29:00)

The writer begs the addressees not to get angry with him and emphasizes that he simply expresses his opinion (lines 6-7 below). His comment that Christianity is the most rational religion and that Buddhism contains incredible stories should have stirred up a lot of attacks by devout Buddhists. But none of the participants pays attention to this point. Everyone seems to take the writer's words into consideration, i.e., he just expressed what he thought; he did not really mean it .

These face balancing acts illustrated here are not performed merely because the participants want to avoid confrontations or understate their differences of opinions, but they are aimed to establish solidarity among the participants, despite the fact that they do not know each other personally and that they may not have an opportunity to talk face-to-face.

6. Contested Ideologies: 'Thick' and 'Thin' Politeness

Eelen (1999) discusses three types of ideologies centering on the notion of politeness. The first and second one correspond to first-order and second-order politeness in Watts, Ide and Ehlich (1992: 3). The third type concerns the social and cultural one. As politeness has been shown in much of the literature to be

embedded in the cultural practices of a community, this type of ideology is an important one and appears to be indispensable in any attempt to account for what politeness actually is.

The relation between politeness and its socio-cultural milieu is a two way process. On the one hand, politeness can provide a window by which some aspects of the respective cultures can be understood. Thus one understands an aspect of Thai culture through a look at what is going on when Thais are being polite to one another. On the other hand, the socio-cultural milieu itself can provide a context by which the various politeness strategies being employed can be interpreted. What has emerged from the examination of the data in the above section shows that Thais have their own ways of maintaining politeness, one of which is to express their sympathy and positive feelings towards other participants, even when they argue with each other. This trait appears to give the tone and the atmosphere of the Thai web board its distinctive quality.

When compared with what is usually happening in CMC in the West, such as the Usenet and the global electronic mailing lists, the difference is clear. Members of the Western (or "international") computer-mediated groups tend to be more agonistic toward one another. They usually want to assert their own identities vis-à-vis others, and often at the expense of others. The Thai CMC, on the other hand, tend to be much less individualistic. This is not to say that there are no heated arguments in the Thai CMC, but those arguments are very often tempered by the need to find a common ground, and are not characterized by the desire to win. When the members debate about whether Buddhism is "irrational", the situation could well have burst into flagrant flames, but we have seen that the humorous tone soon pervades the atmosphere, and at the end no real disagreement is found. This is typical of the Thai way of communication and culture. Furthermore, it is noticeable that, although the members typically do not use real names, thus effectively hiding the identities of those sitting in front of computer screens, they act as if the web board itself is a kind of community to which they all belong.

That Thai identity, evidenced in the use of politeness strategies, is present in these computer-mediated discourses show that Thai culture is resilient enough to withstand the tide of globalization coming through the use of Internet technologies. The web board at *pantip.com* is more like traditional Thai coffee shops where Thais hang out and discuss about everything which interests them (See also Hongladarom 1999). What happens is, appropriating what Walzer (1994: 1-19) has proposed with regards to

morality at home and abroad, that there is the "thin" culture of global messages and systems, which spreads around the world, and the "thick" local culture, which contains its rich myths, narratives and histories that make up its identity.⁸

The implication for politeness is clear. There is the "thin" notion of politeness, the kind discussed in theories. Thus one finds notions such as politeness rules and maxims, positive and negative faces, the model person, politeness strategies, and so on. On the other hand these universal theories need to be tempered by and supplemented with empirical data and concrete particularities coming from the world's various cultures. These particularities, then, constitute the "thick" notion of politeness. Current research shows that politeness does operate in CMC (Herring, 1996; Simmons, 1999). But it is often the kind that corresponds to what Brown and Levinson calls negative politeness. Our data suggest that Thai CMC participants also adhere to the politeness principle, but it is the positive aspect—the attempt to avoid confrontations and make the addressee feel that he or she is part of the community—that is more at issue here, not the negative one. This exemplifies the different "thick" versions of politeness in the two cultures. However, when one looks globally, presupposing that both Thais and Westerners are all humans and as such have the same set of values such as the need for maintaining social relationship, what emerges is then a kind of "thin" politeness.

7. Conclusion

Politeness is a culturally embedded notion. The extensive literature on this line of argument supports this well. To examine the actual manifestations of politeness in various languages and cultures is just to look at social behaviors of the speakers of those languages, what these speakers do when they communicate to one another, and what their values are. Hence the theory that aims at finding universal characteristics in politeness actually is glossing over the differences among cultures and is based on the assumption that humans are the same regarding their rationality and 'face.' That is, this type of theory provides a model to explain the politeness phenomena. The model is constructed based on the assumption that, as humans use language and as they are rational, the manifestations of their rationality—in this case

their 'polite' use of language—should be the same throughout. However, this universality is always mitigated by the localities involved. Perhaps humans anywhere desire to be liked and approved of by their peers, but the ways such desire is actually realized in the concrete situations of language use differ.

If this is so, then there should be a way to reconcile between the two positions. If the "thick" and the "thin" approach is taken into consideration, then perhaps we could see that the universal tendency corresponds to the "thin", and the local strategies correspond to the "thick". That is, there is not a real conflict between the two. It is not that one always has to choose either of the two. The universal and the local go together. Since the universal is applicable anywhere, it lacks the real content that must be taken into account as soon as one peers into the actual use. Therefore, politeness as a culturally embedded notion both relates to human culture and to the various local cultures. As a part of human culture, politeness is an aspect of humans when they are rational and desire solidarity. As a part of the local strategies, on the other hand, such rationality and desire for solidarity express themselves differently.⁹

Finally, there are two points we would like to suggest for further research. First, there is currently a dearth of works done on CMC discourses in the emerging economies, as most research works have focused on the CMC in the developed countries. This line of works would substantiate or shed more light on the idea of cultural embeddedness of politeness. Secondly, as politeness appears to be a very slippery concept relating to many other factors beyond language itself, certainly more interdisciplinary work is called for. It is likely that insights from the neighboring disciplines could clear up some murky issues and provide wider perspectives on this phenomenon itself.

NOTES

¹ A similar phenomenon is taking place in another channel of communication. During these past few years two radio stations were set up in Bangkok with main aims to inform vehicle users of the traffic situation and to report immediate local news, e.g., fires, building collapses, and other kinds of accidents. Not only have Jor Sor 100 and Ruam Duay Chuay Kan 'Let's help each other' become most popular stations for Bangkokians, particularly among taxi drivers, but they also are another form of virtual community that exists in Thai society today.

²According to Lakoff (1973), the shift of rules from Rule 1: Don't impose (be formal) to Rule 3: Make A feel good (be friendly) signals the shift of relationship in the course of interaction. In general, it is not appropriate to follow both rules simultaneously. When two people who are used to speak to each other in a friendly way decide to switch to a more formal way of talking in the same kind of situation, it means they want to indicate that they view their relationship differently, unless they are joking. This is how the generally conceived polite markers in the language can be regarded as impolite.

³The contested sphere of what constitutes politeness is clearly documented in Fraser (1990).

⁴For an overview of computer-mediated discourse, see Herring (forthcoming).

⁵However, if one sees that for the list moderator or the web master to be able to maintain the health and longevity of the list, he or she has no choice but to acquiesce to the needs and values of the list participants. Thus, assumptions that list moderators or web masters are all powerful may need to be revised.

⁶According to Simmons (1999: 521), turn taking in discussion lists on the Internet is subjected to two factors in organisation: frequency and quantity. If the writer writes often or writes long posts, then there is more of that writer's work to be read. However, this may backfire since overdoing it may simply lead to disinterest or even irritation from the other participants.

⁷See Simmons (1999) for the discussion on the shift of relationship in CMC discourse after participants have met face-to-face.

⁸According to Walzer (1994: 1-19), when the Czechs demonstrators took to the streets demanding the abolition of the Communist regime, they carried placards containing such words as "Truth" and "Justice", American audience watching them on television could very well sympathize with them. However, if the Czechs were to work out in detail what kind of justice should be adopted and put in operation in their country, Americans might find this fine-grained notion not to their liking. What this shows is that Americans and Czechs agree "thinly" that truth and justice are good things to have, are worth fighting for. However, when they get to the "thick" of things, there are likely to be disagreements as one group's notion of what actually constitutes truth or justice might differ from another's.

⁹Ide (1989) suggests that Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness be modified by adding the element of 'discernment' which is evident in honorific languages like Japanese. Discernment is a feature of politeness which is embedded in the linguistic convention, and is compared by Ide to Habermas' (1984, 1987) communicative action as a means of realizing shared understanding among a group of linguistic users (243-245). Thus discernment is opposed to the usual notion of individual rationality presupposed by Brown and Levinson, which focuses on the means-end choice, or in Habermas' term, instrumental rationality. We can also see from the data here that when Thai speakers maintain their distinctive way of politeness toward one another even within the 'faceless' confine of *pantip.com*, there seems to be a kind of communicative action in the sense that something is there which is not best explained by relying on means-end rationality alone. Perhaps Thais are more community oriented than Westerners are. Thus it is quite clear that, if one is to search for a truly universal conception of politeness, one should do well to be aware that what 'rationality' is commonly taken to be, viz., instrumental rationality, is perhaps tinged with the belief system and assumption of one particular culture only.

References

- Arundale, Robert, 1999. "An alternative model and ideology of communication for an alternative to politeness theory." *Pragmatics* 9.1: 119-154.
- Brown, Penelope, and Levinson, Stephen, 1978. "Universals in language usage: politeness phenomena." In: Ester N. Goody, ed., *Questions and Politeness*, 56-289. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Penelope, and Levinson, Steven, 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bunz, Ulla and Scott W. Campbell. "Accommodating politeness indicators in personal electronic mail messages." Paper presented at the Association of Internet Researcher's 3rd Annual Conference, Maastricht, The Netherlands, October 13-16, 2002
- Chouliaraki, Lilie, and Fairclough, Norman, 1998. Discourse in late modern society: Rethinking critical discourse analysis. Unpublished Ms.
- Eelen, Gino, 1999. "Politeness and ideology: A critical review." *Pragmatics* 9.1: 163-174.
- Eelen, Gino. 2001. *A Critique of Politeness Theories*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing.
- Fraser, Bruce, 1990. "Perspective on politeness." *Journal of Pragmatics* 14: 219-236.
- Habermas, Jürgen, 1984. *The theory of communicative action, vol. 1: Reason and the rationalization of society*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen, 1987. *The theory of communicative action, vol. 2. Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Held, Gudrun, 1992. "Politeness in linguistic research." In: Watts, Ide, and Ehlich, eds., 131-153.
- Herring, Susan, 1996. "Posting in a different voice: gender and ethics in computer-mediated communication." In C. Ess (ed.), *Philosophical perspectives on computer-mediated communication*, 132-137. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Herring, Susan. Forthcoming. Computer-mediated discourse.
- Hongladarom, Soraj. 1999. "Global culture, local cultures and the Internet: the Thai example." *AI & Society* 13.4: 389-401.

- Ide, Sachiko, 1989. "Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness." *Multilingua* 8.2: 223-271.
- Kienpointer, Manfred, 1999. "Ideologies of politeness: Foreword." *Pragmatics* 9.1: 1-4.
- Lakoff, Robin, 1973. "The logic of politeness: minding your p's and q's." *Papers from the Ninth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, 292-305.
- Leech, Geoffrey, 1983. *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Meier, A. J., 1995. "Defining politeness: Universality in appropriateness." *Language Sciences* 17.4: 345-356.
- Simmons, Thomas L., 1999. "Face threats in a faceless medium: Negotiating ideological parameters in computer mediated communication." In: Jef Verschueren, ed., *Language and ideology: Selected papers from 6th International Pragmatics Conference*, 514-543. Antwerp, Belgium: International Pragmatics Association.
- Walzer, Michael, 1994. *Thick and thin: Moral arguments at home and abroad*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Watts, Richard, 1992. "Linguistic politeness and political behaviour: reconsidering claims for universality." In: Watts, Ide, and Ehlich, eds., 43-69.
- Watts, Richard, Ide, Sachiko, and Ehlich, Konrad, 1992. *Politeness in language: Studies in its history, theory and practice*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.