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The Ambiguity and Polysemy of Power and Solidarity in Professor-Student Emails and Conversations among Friends

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FINDING MYSELF HERE, ON the last day of the 2018 Georgetown University Round Table, I'm reminded of the Round Table I organized in 1981, "Analyzing Discourse: Text and Talk." Looking back from '18 to '81 calls to mind the evolution of the field as well as of my own theoretical perspectives over those thirty-seven years: nearly four decades of analyzing discourse. My remarks today will be a kind of personal as well as disciplinary retrospective. I will go back to Robin Lakoff's (1973) groundbreaking introduction of politeness theory (which is part of what inspired me to pursue the study of linguistics) and to Brown and Gilman's (1960) foundational notion of power and solidarity in order to explain what I refer to in my own work as the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity, as well as the necessity of taking this dynamic into account in order to understand conversational interaction. I will illustrate these concepts in examples from two quite different domains: first, emails exchanged between professors and students, and second, conversations among women friends, the subject of my book *You're the Only One I Can Tell* (Tannen 2017).

Professor-Student Email Exchanges

I first began thinking about emails sent by professors to students as reflecting, and illuminating, the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity when I read an assignment submitted to me by an undergraduate student. Among the requirements of the class in which this student was enrolled are what I call "field notes," in each of which students recount an interaction they participated in, then analyze it by applying theories and methods we covered in class. This student wrote a field note in which he presented and commented on an email exchange he had with a professor. Because he did not wish to identify the professor, and I therefore could not seek permission to

quote the professor's emails, I will give an idea of the exchange, and of the student's comments on it, by presenting hypothetical emails that I wrote myself, patterned on the real ones that the student presented and analyzed but including no information or wording that could identify either the professor or the student.[1]

The exchange begins with a query posited by the student:

> Dear Professor Smith,
>
> I am in the process of registering for courses for next term and would like to make sure that a course I'm planning to take will fulfill a requirement for my degree. I have decided to take "Introduction to Understanding" and "Problems of International Negotiations." I know that the course "Problems of International Negotiations" can fulfill requirements for many other programs as well. Therefore, while I am sure "Introduction to Understanding" fulfills a requirement for my program, I just wanted to confirm that "Problems of International Negotiations" would also do so.
>
> Thank you for your attention.
>
> Yours truly,
>
> John Feffer

Here is the professor's response:

> Both courses will count for your program. However, Introduction to Understanding fulfills a specific requirement for your program while International Negotiations would count as an elective.

I didn't notice anything remarkable about this professor's reply. In my view, the student should have been satisfied, as the professor answered the question clearly and fully. But the student was not pleased. In his field note, he observed:

> No salutation, no signature! And since there is also a course titled "Approaches to International Negotiations," I needed to make sure the professor actually meant "Problems of International Negotiations." So I wrote again:
>
> Dear Professor,
>
> I appreciate your reply to my query. I just wanted to make sure that "Problems of International Negotiations" would be counted the same as "Approaches to International Negotiations." So I am writing to confirm that "Problems of International Negotiations" (which is what I would like to take) counts for my program.
>
> I am grateful for your clarification.
>
> With all best wishes, and with many thanks,
>
> John

The professor replied:

> Yes!

This reply also sounded unremarkable to me. It, too, answered John's question clearly. Moreover, the exclamation point evinced good will. What I found remarkable was John's comment on it:

> "Yes!," that was it!
>
> …
>
> Again, the email included no salutation or proper closing. The monosyllabic reply made me feel that I was bothering the professor with my questions. It could even lead to misunderstandings, as it was so cryptic.

John went on to say that this professor's email style was not anomalous. Many professors, he complained, wrote similar emails, failing to observe proper email etiquette. In addition to resenting the omission of formal elements, John also complained that many professors' emails end with an automatic signature, another indication of disregard.

When I read this field note, I was stunned, not only because the professor's emails seemed perfectly acceptable to me but also—especially—because they closely resemble emails I myself had sent to students. It never occurred to me that they could be perceived as offensive. In order to learn whether John's reaction to this professor's, and other professors', emails was idiosyncratic, I read his field note to the class, which erupted in a chorus of agreement. The other students, too, said they regularly receive such emails from professors, and most also said that they too find them rude. I have gotten similar reactions from many classes since: every student is able to bring in similar examples—and they often do, for their own field notes, in which they explain why they find their professors' truncated email styles offensive.

My consciousness raised, I began to notice that most students' emails to me—especially those initiating a request or query—follow this pattern:

> A salutation (usually in the form of Dear Professor Tannen)
>
> An opening greeting (often the now-routinized hope that I'm well, or about the weather)
>
> A full explanation of a request, in grammatical sentences with proper capitalization and punctuation
>
> Closing well wishes and/or thanks
>
> "Sincerely" (or the like)
>
> Name (usually first name but sometimes full name)

I also began to notice that my responses tended to omit some or all of these elements, leaving only a substantive reply to the query, often in truncated form and devoid of the requirements of formal writing, like punctuation and capitalization.

Here is just one of many similar exchanges I was chagrined to find archived on my own server. A student sent the following request:

> Hi Professor!
>
> I hope your summer is going well! I'm starting to apply to internships for the fall, and I wanted to ask if you'd be willing to be included in my academic references? I don't believe I need any letters of recommendation, but I would like to provide the contact information of professors who know my work. Could you let me know if it's alright if I list you, and if so what contact information would be best? (which email address and/or office phone etc.).
>
> Thanks so much!
>
> Kate Thompson

It was all there: the salutation, including a respectful form of direct address (not my name, but "Professor"), the friendly opening greeting ("I hope your summer is going well!"), a full explanation of the request in grammatical, properly punctuated sentences, softened with circumlocutions ("I wanted to ask if…," "Could you let me know if…"), the friendly and appreciative closing ("Thanks so much!") and a signature ("Kate Thompson").

Here is how I responded. (Gwynne was my assistant at the time):

> yes of course
>
> best to use my official email address and phone: tannend@georgetown.edu 202/687-5910
>
> that way Gwynne will be alerted and make sure I meet deadlines, etc.

Rereading this, I could hear John's—or any student's—potential complaint: "No greeting! No friendly beginning! No kind regards! No signature! No capitalization to start sentences or periods to end them!"

Faced with this incriminating evidence, I had to ask myself how I could justify such disregard, and why I had been oblivious to the negative impression my email style could, and in at least some cases would, make on recipients. The answer was obvious: the ambiguity of power and solidarity. Though I didn't think it through at the time, I am certain that I thought I was being casual and therefore friendly. In contrast, John (and, I now know, some and probably most other students) would interpret my informality as rude. In other words, the markers of informality were ambiguous: they could mean friendliness (solidarity) or disrespect (a reflection of my professorial power).

Though I am now keenly aware of this ambiguity, I continue to be surprised by the differing responses to email practices of which my students make me aware. Just recently, in a field note analyzing her own email exchange with a professor, a student complained that the professor "does not even take the time or effort to delete the 'Sent from my iPhone.'" Again, I was caught off guard to see my own practice disapproved—and, from my point of view, misinterpreted. When I use my iPhone to send emails, I leave that automatic warning so recipients will know that any infelicities in my message, including its brevity, are due to that mechanical limitation. How unfair—how ambiguous!—that the student gets the precise impression that I am trying to preclude: lack of care both for the message and for her.

This is just one of many assumptions I had taken for granted that I have learned are the opposite of students'. Another comment in a recent field note made me realize that the meaning of "casual" is itself ambiguous: the student used that very word to describe why she found a professor's email reply to a query rude: "he responded in a very blunt and casual manner." In explaining her reaction, she referred to the professor's use of the markers of informality I just illustrated in my own, and also to his signing off with his first name—something I'm willing to bet the professor thought would be appreciated. In her discussion, the student wrote that although she realizes the professor was probably trying to express solidarity, she "still found

(and still finds) the bluntness and level of casualness in his email to be rude and condescending."

The term—the concept—"condescending" sheds light on the ambiguity of power and solidarity. Another of this student's comments explains this beautifully: "As a student who wrote a formal and much longer email, I expected at least a somewhat formal email back, and when I received the opposite, I interpreted the email as rude." What she went on to say is key: "It is generally understood that it would be rude for me, the student, to email him, the professor, in the fashion he emailed me, so to me, regardless of what his intent was, sending an email like this to me was not a sign of solidarity but rather one of power, and came across poorly." In other words, a professor's use of solidarity markers signals power because only professors have the option of using them in this context. Thus, professors' casualness in emails is not only ambiguous but also polysemous. That is, it can *both* be friendly *and* express power: I was indeed being friendly, but because only I had the privilege of choosing to be casual as a sign of friendliness, I was also expressing my power. Therein lies the polysemy of power and solidarity in professor-student emails.

This polysemy is pervasive in professor-student relationships, and therefore in our email exchanges. The student I'm calling John was offended that his professor did not address him by name, whereas he addressed the professor by name. But the name he used for his professor was title last name, whereas he would have liked his professor to address him by his first name. Had the professor done so, his salutation would have been polysemous: reflecting solidarity by matching John's use of a salutation, but reflecting the power differential by using first name whereas the student used title last name.

This power relationship is reflected, moreover, in the fact that the overwhelming majority of prior research examines students' and not professors' emails (Bella and Sifianou 2012; Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Bolkan and Holmgren 2012; Boshrabadi and Sarabi 2016; Chejnová 2014; Chen 2015; Deveci and Hmida 2017; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Ewald 2016; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Jones et al. 2016; Kim et al. 2016; Knupsky and Nagy-Bell 2011; Merrison et al. 2012; Mohamadi 2014; Nikleva 2018; Salazar Campillo 2018; Savić 2018, Stephens, Houser and Cowan 2009; Thomas-Tate, Daugherty and Bartkoski 2015; Zhu 2017). Those that examine professors' emails, or both, are far fewer (for example, Costello 2011; Dickinson 2017; Lam 2014, 2016).

The ubiquity of the contrast between professors' and students' emails, and the significance of the contrast, is reflected in this cartoon from a webcomic about the life of graduate students (see figure 4.1).[2] It is not by chance, furthermore, that this cartoon appears on a website for students. That I had paid no attention to the differences between my way of emailing students and their ways of emailing me in itself reflects the power difference between us. Paying no attention is a privilege enjoyed by professors, because offending students—as we often do, I was chagrined to learn—has few or no negative consequences for us, whereas there are many potential negative consequences for students if they offend professors.

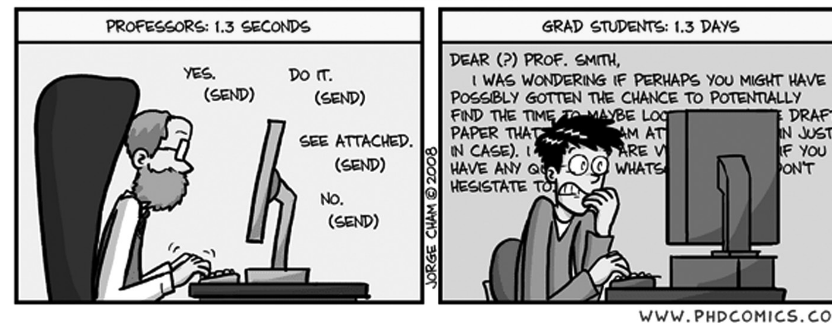

Figure 4.1. Cartoon showing contrast between a professor's and a grad student's emails, from the student's perspective (*Piled Higher and Deeper* by Jorge Cham, www.phdcomics.com)

Politeness Theory and Being Polite

The differences in email practices of professors and students take us into the territory not only of power and solidarity but also of politeness theory. I say this not only because students who object to the cryptic emails they receive from professors almost always say they found them "rude." Rather, I say it because the theoretical framework of power and solidarity is inextricably intertwined with that of politeness theory. That's why this technical sense of politeness is frequently confused with the common parlance notion of being polite. To unpack that claim, I'll begin with my own theoretical beginnings in the phenomenon I call conversational style and its relation to professor-student emails.

From the perspective of the nontechnical sense of politeness, my realization that students find emails like those I send rude is similar to the realization that inspired my dissertation and the theory of conversational style that I first developed there and have expanded and elaborated since: the shock I experienced as a (very polite) native of New York City finding myself considered rude in California. Among the sources of that unsettling result were discovering that questions intended to show interest were perceived as intrusive; that talking along to show enthusiastic listenership (what I later dubbed "cooperative overlap") was mistaken for interruption; and that respectful directness could come across as offensive bluntness. I attributed these and other misjudgments to differences in conversational style based on regional and ethnic influences. But how could the same ways of speaking be considered polite in one place and rude in another? I found a partial answer in Robin Lakoff's (1973) "rules of politeness," which inspired Brown and Levinson's ([1978] 1987) framework, which in turn inspired the now vast and ever-expanding literature on politeness theory (and its recent offshoot, impoliteness theory).

Lakoff devised her rules of politeness in response to Grice's (1967) rules of conversation, which she renamed "rules of clarity," pointing out that Grice's rules make

sense only if clarity is the sole goal of an interaction—which, she also points out, it never is when humans are interacting. Her rules of politeness are

1. Don't impose
2. Give options
3. Make the other feel good; be friendly

Lakoff associates each rule with a communicative style: distance, deference, and camaraderie, respectively. I frequently illustrate these styles with reference to a hypothetical question, "Would you like something to drink?" A distant style, following rule 1, Don't impose, would lead to the reply "No thank you," whether or not the speaker is thirsty. A deferent style, following rule 2, Give options, might yield "I'll have whatever you're having." And camaraderie style, following rule 3, Be friendly, might result in "Yes, please, that would be lovely." A stronger form of camaraderie might lead to "I'd love a coke." Even stronger yet, a very close friend or family member might not wait to be offered but ask, "Have you got anything to drink?"—or go right to the refrigerator and help themselves. These varying ways of applying rule 3, Be friendly, are a reminder that an individual's style can reflect Lakoff's rules in different ways, to different degrees, and in different combinations.

Though Lakoff called her rules "politeness," her theory was not about being polite in the sense of polite vs. rude—what my student John referred to as "etiquette"—but rather in the sense of rules of politeness vs. rules of clarity. That is, she was suggesting that in order to understand the language of everyday conversation, linguists need a theory that takes into account the requirements of social interaction. That doesn't mean, however, that there is no relationship between her rules of politeness and the nontechnical notion of being polite. On the contrary, her rules provide a theoretical framework that accounts for what people assume to be polite or rude—and for cross-cultural differences in those assumptions.

Lakoff's rules of politeness did not derive from it, but I saw a connection to Brown and Gilman's 1960 article "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity," which examines the choice of formal or informal second-person pronouns in languages that have such a pronominal distinction, such as French (*vous* and *tu*) and Spanish (*usted* and *tu*). A parallel in English is use of first name vs. title last name. Just as my student noted that a professor who writes noticeably casual emails is condescending, for Brown and Gilman it isn't the use of the pronoun *tu* (or of first name) that creates solidarity; rather, it is symmetry. Solidarity prevails when friends address each other by first name, but also when coworkers address each other by title last name. In contrast, power prevails not when the pronoun *vous* or title last name is used, but when the use of pronouns or forms of names is asymmetrical. In other words, if one party uses the informal pronoun or first name and the other must use the formal pronoun or title last name, they are in a relationship of unequal power. This is the norm when professors and students interact.

That scholars often lose sight of the ambiguity of power and solidarity became obvious to me when I encountered papers in the field—and there were many—that identified particular ways of speaking as serving power. (Scholars, for some reason, have been far more interested in identifying "power maneuvers" in discourse than in

what I call "connection maneuvers.") I would immediately think of situations in which the same way of speaking could signal solidarity—and might, indeed, be intended to signal it in the very discourse under analysis. For example, it is common for scholars to refer to as "interruption" any instance in which a speaker begins speaking before another has finished. But I knew that such instances could be "cooperative overlap." That is, a speaker might begin speaking while another has the floor (hence "overlap") not in order to wrest the floor but to show enthusiastic listenership (hence, "cooperative"). In that case, the one who begins to speak assumes that the one speaking will not yield the floor unless they want to. This assumption is shared in a conversational ecosystem in which it is agreed that a really good conversation should have no perceptible silences, and a way to avoid such silences is to keep speaking (albeit in ways that signal you're running out of steam) until someone else begins. Thus, beginning to speak while another is speaking is ambiguous because it could be an interruption (an attempt to take the floor before the other is ready to relinquish it)—that is, a power play—or cooperative overlap (a way to show enthusiastic listenership and make sure there are no uncomfortable silences)—you might say, a connection play. Now imagine a conversation among a number of speakers who agree that exuberant use of not only cooperative overlap but also interruption makes for a really good conversation: everyone feels free to interrupt, so no one feels stymied or intruded upon if others try to take the floor while they're speaking. Everyone trusts that others who really don't want to yield the floor will just keep talking or return later to complete their thoughts. In this scenario, speaking along is polysemous, because it is both an attempt to take the floor while another has rights to it and a way of showing enthusiastic listenership. (For a fuller discussion of the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity as seen in a range of linguistic strategies, see Tannen 1994.)

Conversations among Women Friends

Lakoff's rules of politeness, as well as the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity, became pivotal again when I undertook a study of conversations among women friends (Tannen 2017). For example, two friends were taking a walk around a lake; one was telling the other about a personal problem. The listener occasionally interrupted her friend's account by pointing out something in their environment: a particularly beautiful flower or a duck followed by ducklings gliding in a line behind her across the surface of the lake. Suddenly, the speaker stopped walking and protested, "You haven't listened to a word I've said." This exchange was reported to me by the listener, who told me she was hurt by her friend's accusation, and also baffled by it. Of course she'd been listening. She called her friend's attention to sights she believed her friend would appreciate not because she wasn't listening but because sharing enjoyment of their environment was another form of connection, analogous to and (in her view) reinforcing the connection created by troubles talk. It was ambiguous, because her friend interpreted her cooperative overlap, intended as a show of connection, as an interruption indicating she wasn't interested in her friend's talk.

Such potential ambiguity is ubiquitous in friendship, as in all relationships. A woman told me she was hurt because she had told a friend that her mother was in

the hospital and the friend never asked how her mother was doing. When confronted, the friend said she had learned from her own family that one shouldn't ask about anything as sensitive as illness; if someone wants you to know, they will tell you. A similar ambiguity explains differing styles with respect to asking personal questions: Is it a show of interest or nosy and intrusive? When a personal question, like a conversational move such as overlap, is meant as solidarity but taken as intrusive, it comes across as rude. And when solidarity is expected but not offered, that too can come across as rude. I was explaining to a friend who has what I have described as a "high-involvement style" about Robin Lakoff's rules of politeness. I pointed out that some speakers tend to apply Lakoff's rule Maintain camaraderie, while others tend to apply her rule Don't impose. My friend interjected, "But the not imposing is so offensive!"

In writing about everyday conversations, I sometimes refer not to power and solidarity but to the related concepts: competition and connection. For the study that led to my book about women friends, I held focused conversations with eighty girls and women between the ages of seven and ninety-seven. I call them "focused conversations" rather than "interviews" because I did not follow a preset protocol or ask a predetermined list of questions. Instead, I began by saying something like, "Tell me about your friendships with women." Sometimes I added options: "You can start with who your friends are now, or you can go back to your friends from childhood, or to who were the most important friends over your life." Sometimes I asked, later on, questions related to topics I knew I'd be interested in, like "Have you ever cut off a friend or been cut off?" (The example of friends walking around a lake emerged from one such focused conversation.) In these conversations, and in examples I encountered everywhere once I began thinking in these terms, it became clear that competition and connection are ambiguous and polysemous in women's friendships. An example emerged in an incident that occurred at the 2016 Olympics.

Anna and Lisa Hahner, identical twins representing Germany, came in eighty-first and eighty-second in the women's marathon. When a photo of the twins crossing the finish line holding hands was widely disseminated, they were criticized by German track and field officials for having been insufficiently competitive. In the words of the sports director of the German Athletics Federation, "Every athlete should be motivated to demonstrate his or her best performance and aim for the best possible result." He and his colleagues apparently felt that one or both runners had compromised their time in order to stay together—and to engineer their photo-op finish. But Anna explained that they hadn't planned to join hands. Unable to keep up with her sister's pace she had fallen behind, but: "After forty kilometers there was a turning point, and I knew, 'Okay Anna, two kilometers to go to close the gap to Lisa. I invested all I had and three hundred meters before the finish line, I was next to Lisa. It was a magical moment that we could finish this marathon together." It was the magic of that moment that inspired them to spontaneously reach for each other's hands as they approached the finish line.[3]

Was Anna Hahner driven by connection or competition? Did seeing her sister ahead of her trigger competition—she didn't want to be beaten by her sister—or

connection—wanting to catch up to her sister, so they could finish together? It is ambiguous: it could have been either. It is also polysemous: the competitive urge not to let her sister beat her may have been indistinguishable from the lure of finishing together.

The connection-competition ambiguity seen in this example is inseparable from a dynamic particular to women's friendships, as to other relationships among women as well: the valorizing of being the same. Sameness was part of Brown and Gilman's (1960) definition of solidarity, which they described as a "set of relations which are symmetrical; for example, attended the same school, have the same parents, practice the same profession..." As far back as the research I conducted for my book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (Tannen 1990), I encountered evidence that girls and women, more than boys and men, tend to speak in ways that emphasize sameness. This is seen in the iconic rejoinders, "I feel the same way"; "I do that, too"; and "The same thing happened to me." In our focused conversations, women often referred to sameness as a basis for friendship. For example, one woman said of a friend, "We have the same sense of humor. We are both complete dorks." Another said of her best friend, "We're both writers, both Japanese, and don't have children so we don't have to feign interest as we do in other friends' children." This speaker also said, "At first I thought we couldn't be friends because she's too beautiful and too high-strung," but as their talk turned to their cats, she began to feel a connection. This last example is significant not only because it references sameness as the basis for connection, but also because it assumes that competition is a barrier. The notion that a woman who is "too beautiful" could not be a friend is one of many comments I heard that indicated an assumption that a friend should not be better than you. In the conversations I conducted, and again, in many other contexts, I encountered examples of girls and women being rejected by friends because they excelled.

In her memoir *The Lost Landscape*, Joyce Carol Oates (2015, 123–24) tells how, when she was in seventh grade, she became a Methodist in order to get close to her friend Jean. A reverend in their church encouraged both girls to enter a competition to memorize a hundred verses of the Gospel according to St. John. Joyce excelled at this task, and she won the competition. But she lost her friend, who accused, "You think you're so smart!"—and ended the friendship. Accusations like "You think you're so smart!" were recalled by many women who told me of hurtful—even traumatic—endings of friendships when they were girls. When women told me about such hurtful experiences and recounted the accusations hurled by the rejecting friends, the vast majority were versions of "She's snobby," "She's stuck up," or "She thinks she's something." In other words, she thinks she's better.

Among the most striking such examples was told to me by a woman who said she still feels guilty because when she was in high school, her friend group turned on and ejected a girl who had been her good friend in junior high—and she didn't stand up for her, but instead went along with the group. "It's true," the woman said of the friend, "she was really good at sports and cute. And she had made friends with some older girls. But she didn't deserve what we did to her." This explanation took

my breath away: being physically attractive and excelling at sports are characteristics that are often described as reasons that boys gain status in their groups. But here they were referred to as offenses. Though the woman who told me this did not say so explicitly, I heard unspoken in the background the accusation "She thought she was better than us."

If "I'm the same" reinforces connection, then "I'm different" can be heard as "I'm better," suggesting competition. And this tendency to not only value but demand sameness, in order to avoid implications of competition, was mentioned by several women I spoke to as reasons they find friendships with women to be challenging. One woman said she finds friendship with women "difficult terrain to navigate," and that consequently she prefers men as friends. To explain, she said that she finds men seem to expect difference, whereas her women friends can't abide it. If she expresses opinions different from theirs, they accuse her of being judgmental. Another woman expressed a similar sentiment: "My women friends don't let you be different. If a friend says she has a problem and I say, 'That's not a problem for me,' she complains, 'Don't put me down.'"

Even responses like "I'm the same" and "The same thing happened to me," which express—and help establish—connection can also express competition. When a friend responds to a troubles talk account by telling a matching story, it can be heard as a reassuring, "I'm the same." But it can also be heard as if the friend is saying, "Forget you. Let's talk about me." Or it can sound like she's implying that what happened to her is worse. That ambiguity arose in the following conversation, which was reported by a student in a field note written for my class.

The student, whom I'll call Helen, while studying with a friend I'll call Brooke, initiated a bit of troubles talk. Here's how Helen recalled the exchange:

> Helen: This is ridiculous. Everyone is getting to check things off, and I won't be done with a single class until next Thursday.
> Brooke: I would take that over my schedule! I have almost a hundred pages of papers to write by Monday. Please tell me how I'm supposed to not fail chemistry!
> Helen: At least it'll be over soon. Think about it. You'll have been home for three days before I've taken a single exam. It'll be so nice when it's over.
> Brooke: Yeah but I literally have no time to study!
> Helen: Yeah but you'll make it through. God, I'm so ready for finals to be over.
> Brooke: At least you have the whole week to prepare!

In commenting on this exchange in her field note, Helen explained that she felt Brooke wasn't matching her troubles but topping them, by insisting that her situation was worse. She also explained that she herself was responding to Brooke in a way intended to provide comfort—and therefore connection—by reassuring Brooke that she'd be fine, because her situation wasn't so bad. Helen convincingly supported this interpretation by reference to the exchange. However, Brooke's comments are arguably indistinguishable from Helen's: both can be seen as one-upmanship—or, more accurately, one-downmanship. In comforting Brooke by pointing out the positive (Brooke's ordeal would be over soon), Helen was saying that her situation was

worse (her own ordeal would go on longer). I don't believe there is any "real" meaning here; the friends' comments aren't "really" about connection or competition. Both friends' words could be seen as either competition or connection—or both at once. Given that inescapable ambiguity and potential polysemy, it's common for friends to feel, as Helen did, that their attempts to establish connection are somehow twisted into competition. And it's common for women to feel that competition is unpleasant and unseemly, especially if their intention is connection. The ambiguity and polysemy of connection and competition are always at play in conversations among friends, as they are in email exchanges between professors and students.

I have tried herein to demonstrate that examining exchanges between professors and students adds to our understanding of the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity, and that the ambiguity of power and solidarity explains how I could assume I was reflecting solidarity by omitting the elements of a formal missive but come across to students as rude. Examining professor-student email exchanges sheds light in turn on the polysemy of power and solidarity: when I send bare-bones email responses to students, I am both being friendly by being casual and also reflecting my higher rank in the university. It is because of my professorial power that I can answer quickly, omitting elements because I am busy, whereas students, no matter how busy they are, generally feel they have to spend as much time as necessary to include all the elements of formal letters. I have further suggested that considering conversational style differences in everyday conversations between women friends also affords insight into the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity: ambiguity because what one friend intends in the spirit of connection can be interpreted as competition, and polysemy because, as occurred in the example of two students studying for finals, a friend might establish connection by matching troubles and reassuring her friend that her plight isn't so bad, yet also be topping her friend's troubles by claiming that her own are worse.

By calling attention to this ambiguity and polysemy, I am striking a note of caution for scholars of interaction who are inclined to interpret a way of speaking as reflecting a specific motive or seeking a particular effect, because any comment or gesture intended to show solidarity or create connection can come across as—and simultaneously be—an expression of power, and any utterance or move that seems obviously to express power can instead, or simultaneously, be an expression of solidarity.

I will conclude where I began, with emails I send to students. I still find myself composing cryptic responses to students' email queries, but I now frequently stop myself before pressing Send, and go back to add "Dear Student Name," a friendly opening greeting, and a closing such as "Best." But I don't sign off with a solidarity-reflecting (but potentially condescending) first name, nor the solidarity-reflecting first initial, but generally end with the polysemously solidarity and power-inflected initials "DT."

Notes

1 Though this first email exchange is fabricated, the next email example I present is real, as is the name of the student who signed it: Kate Thompson. I have used the email, and her name, with her permission, for which I thank her. Although I do not identify him here, I remain grateful to the student who

raised my consciousness about, and set me on the path of examining, professor-student emails. I am also grateful to the other students whose comments on professors' emails I quote here: Elizabeth Miller and Delaney Dietzgen. Examples of conversations among friends, and my analysis of them, come from Tannen (2017), and are also used with permission. The names in the last example are pseudonymous.

2 I am grateful to Didem Ikizoglou for calling this cartoon to my attention.

3 The quote from Anna Hahner, and my account of their marathon performances, are drawn from Christopher Clarey, "Hand in hand: Did their finish cross a line?," *New York Times* August 17, 2016, B10.

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