Online Politeness And Impoliteness Strategies In Comment Sections

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Abstract
The proliferation of digital media has significantly reshaped human communication, giving rise to interactive online spaces such as comment sections on social media platforms, blogs, and online news outlets. These spaces have become arenas for public discourse where politeness and impoliteness are dynamically negotiated. This study examines the pragmatic realization of politeness and impoliteness strategies in online comment sections, drawing on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory as its theoretical framework. Using insights from discourse-pragmatic analysis of online interactions, the study identifies common politeness strategies such as hedging, mitigation, and positive alignment, alongside impoliteness strategies including insults, sarcasm, mockery, and trolling. The study further explores sociopragmatic factors influencing language use online, such as anonymity, power relations, topic sensitivity, and cultural context. The findings reveal that while online platforms encourage participation and self-expression, they also lower social constraints, thereby increasing face-threatening behavior. The study contributes to the growing body of research on digital pragmatics and has implications for digital literacy, online moderation, and ESL pragmatics pedagogy.

Keywords: online discourse, politeness, impoliteness, pragmatics, comment sections, digital communication

I. Introduction

The advent of the internet and social media has transformed patterns of communication, shifting interaction from predominantly face-to-face contexts to computer-mediated environments. One prominent feature of this transformation is the emergence of comment sections, which allow users to respond publicly to posts, news articles, videos, and opinions. These spaces facilitate interaction among individuals who may never meet physically, often across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Despite their potential for democratic participation, online comment sections are frequently associated with incivility, verbal aggression, and impoliteness. However, not all online interactions are hostile; users also employ politeness strategies to express agreement, mitigate disagreement, and maintain social harmony. This duality makes online comment sections an important site for pragmatic inquiry.

This study investigates how politeness and impoliteness strategies are enacted in online comment sections, focusing on the linguistic mechanisms users employ to manage face, express stance, and negotiate social relationships in digital environments.

II. Literature Review

Politeness in Pragmatic Studies

Politeness has long been a central concept in pragmatics. Brown and Levinson (1987) conceptualize politeness as strategies used to mitigate Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) in interaction. Their theory distinguishes between positive politeness, which attends to the hearer's desire for approval, and negative politeness, which respects the hearer's need for autonomy.

Subsequent scholars have critiqued and expanded this model. Watts (2003) and Locher and Watts (2005) argue that politeness should be viewed as relational work, emphasizing context and participants' evaluations rather than fixed strategies.

Impoliteness and Offensive Language

Impoliteness research gained prominence with Culpeper's (1996) seminal work, which defines impoliteness as communicative behavior that intentionally or conventionally attacks face. Culpeper (2011) further identifies impoliteness strategies such as bald-on-record impoliteness, sarcasm, and mock politeness. Online environments, due to anonymity and reduced social sanctions, have been shown to foster impolite behavior (Dynel, 2015).

Online and Computer-Mediated Discourse

Studies on computer-mediated communication (CMC) reveal that the absence of physical cues and immediacy alters pragmatic norms (Herring, 2004). Research indicates that online comment sections often encourage polarized discourse, emotional expression, and reduced politeness (Papacharissi, 2004). Nevertheless, norms of politeness still operate, especially in moderated or professional digital spaces.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary Pragmatic theories:

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that speakers employ politeness strategies to protect positive face and negative face. In online comment sections, acts such as criticism, disagreement, and correction function as FTAs, necessitating mitigation through linguistic strategies like hedging and indirectness.

Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory

Culpeper's (1996, 2011) framework focuses on communicative strategies designed to attack face. This theory is particularly relevant for online discourse, where insults, ridicule, and trolling are prevalent. The theory allows for the identification of both intentional and perceived impoliteness.

III. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative discourse-pragmatic approach, drawing on naturally occurring data from online comment sections on social media platforms and online news sites. Comments were purposively selected based on topical relevance and interactional density. The data were analyzed using pragmatic and discourse-analytic tools to identify politeness and impoliteness strategies.

Although the study is qualitative in nature, it aligns with established methods in digital discourse analysis (Herring, 2004; Dynel, 2015).

Politeness Strategies in Online Comment Sections
Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness strategies aim to create solidarity and reduce social distance. In online comments, these include:
Compliments and praise (e.g., "This is a thoughtful post")
Inclusive pronouns such as we and us
Expressions of agreement prior to disagreement
These strategies serve to enhance interpersonal rapport and encourage constructive dialogue.

Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness strategies minimize imposition and respect autonomy. These include hedging expressions (perhaps, it seems), apologies preceding critique, and indirect forms of disagreement. Their use demonstrates that users remain sensitive to face concerns even in anonymous settings. Such strategies reflect users' awareness of face needs, even in anonymous contexts.

Off-Record Strategies

Off-record strategies allow users to express opinions indirectly through rhetorical questions, irony, or understatement, thereby reducing accountability for potential face threats.

Impoliteness Strategies in Online Comment Sections
Bald-on-Record Impoliteness

Bald-on-record impoliteness involves direct and unmitigated face attacks, such as insults and imperatives. These strategies are common in emotionally charged discussions and reflect minimal concern for social harmony.

Positive and Negative Impoliteness

Positive impoliteness damages the hearer's need for approval through ridicule and name-calling, while negative impoliteness restricts autonomy through threats and dismissive language (Culpeper, 2011).

Sarcasm, Mock Politeness, and Trolling

Sarcasm and mock politeness often disguise impoliteness as humor, while trolling represents deliberate provocation intended to disrupt interaction (Dynel, 2015).

Factors Influencing Online Politeness and Impoliteness

The realization of politeness and impoliteness strategies is shaped by several factors, including anonymity, power asymmetry, topic sensitivity, cultural norms, and platform moderation policies. In ESL contexts, pragmatic transfer from local sociocultural norms further influences online communicative behavior. In ESL contexts, pragmatic transfer from local cultures may further influence perceptions of politeness and impoliteness.

Implications of the Study

The findings have implications for digital literacy education, online moderation practices, and ESL pragmatics instruction. They also contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions in digital pragmatics and discourse studies.

IV. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that online comment sections are complex pragmatic environments where politeness and impoliteness coexist. While the digital medium facilitates expression and participation, it also weakens traditional social constraints, leading to increased face-threatening behavior. A pragmatic analysis of these interactions highlights the strategic use of language in negotiating identity, power, and social relations in online discourse.

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