Politeness Strategies in Online Conversations From a Wechat Group

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Focusing on the social phenomenon of politeness in daily communication, this study tackles the online language occurring in a Wechat group from the perspective of politeness strategies. The selected chat transcripts are categorized in to five types based on the criterion of different communicative purposes, naming exchanging information, expressing gratitude, offering help, requesting, and demanding & warning. The analysis indicates that positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies are prevalent in online communication. Besides, they are proved to be powerful instruments to reduce the risk of face threatening acts and maintain a harmonious social relationship.

Keywords: politeness principle, politeness strategy, online communication, communicative purposes

Introduction

With the advent of Web 3.0 era, the Internet has become an indispensable part of citizens' life, which has also exerted a profound impact on language in communication. Different from face-to-face communication, body language and intonation cannot be directly perceived by the online interlocutors, which may result in misunderstanding. Therefore, the language used to express ideas and attitude clearly plays a significant role in successful online communication. In the past three decades, politeness has been the one of the major concerns in pragmatics and many linguists have proposed various theoretical models (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Watts, 2003). The study of Internet language politeness thus has become one of the hot topics in the field of pragmatics in recent years. This paper takes Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Principle as the framework and aims to analyse the linguistic data collected form a Wechat group. The purpose of the research is to find out how people use politeness strategies under the context of online communication to accomplish their communicative purposes and maintain a good rapport with others.

Literature Review

Politeness

There are mainly two approaches for the investigation of politeness, the traditional approach with the famous linguists, such as Leech (1983), Brown and Levinson (1987), and Culpeper (1996), and the modern one with the representatives of Eelen (2001), Watts (2003; 2005), Garcés (2013), and Haugh (2013). The traditional approach stresses speaker production and clarifies polite strategies and mechanisms, while the latter focuses on the hearers' evaluation and perception in communication.

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In terms of the definition of politeness, various versions are offered to explain its nature. Lakoff (1977, p. 88), as the first scholar who tackled the social phenomenon from the perspective of pragmatics, defines politeness as "a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange". Leech (1983, p. 82) stated that politeness is "the forms of behaviour which facilities personal and social interaction to obtain an atmosphere of harmony between interlocutors via minimizing the inherent inner conflict in all human interactions". Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 61) argued that politeness is "forms of behaviour used to maintain and develop communication between potentially aggressive partners". They suggest that individuals have the desire to be respected, named as face, and politeness refers to the use of some language strategies to satisfy the desire.

Watts (2003, p. 29) regarded polite behaviour as a "marked extension or enhancement of politic behaviour". Politic behaviour is the appropriate or unmarked linguistic and non-linguistic form the participants perform based on the social norms in ongoing interaction (Watts, 2003; Davies, Haugh, & Merrison, 2011).

Politeness Strategies

As one of the influential models in politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) borrowed the concept of "face" from Goffman (1967) and postulated Politeness Principle. Face refers to the public self-image that the social members seek to establish for themselves (Goffman, 1967). The theory indicates that there are two polarities of faces that characterize different social desires. The desire to be respected and approved by others is called the positive face, and the desire to be independent and free from others' interference and impositions is the negative face. However, Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that the utterance or behaviours are a potential threat to the hearer's face. Face Threatening Acts (FTA) can be exemplified as the acts of criticizing, interrupting, imposing, disagreement, asking for a favour, requesting information or service, making suggestions or giving advice, etc. (Holmes, 2006). In daily communication, the speakers will endeavour to save the message receivers' "face" and soften the impact of face threatening actions. The behaviour expressing friendliness and admiration to the addressee is described as positive politeness behaviour. On the contrary, the actions avoiding impeding and imposing belongs to negative politeness. Both the forms politeness attempt to minimize the effect of FTAs by using several strategies, which are embodied in different expressions.

Brown and Levinson (1987) listed five key strategies to tackle potential face threatening acts: (1) do not do FTA at all, that is saying nothing; (2) do FTA off-record, that is to express indirectly so that it can be interpreted ambiguously; (3) do FTA on-record with redressive work, using positive politeness to express solidarity and appreciation; (4) do FTA on-record with redressive work, using negative politeness to maintain distance and independence; and (5) do FTA bald-on-the record without any redressive work, that is to express directly and concisely. On-records face threatening acts with redressive work demonstrate the speakers' attempt to diminish the potential face damage on the hearers.

In Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, 15 sub-categories are posited as positive politeness strategies, which indicate the hearers' desire to be liked and to reduce the social distance between the communicators.

Sub-strategy 1: Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, and goods); Sub-strategy 2: Exaggerate (interest, approval, and sympathy with H); Sub-strategy 3: Intensify interest with H; Sub-strategy 4: Use in-group identity markers; Sub-strategy 5: Seek agreement; Sub-strategy 6: Avoid disagreement; Sub-strategy 7: Presuppose/raise/assert common ground; Sub-strategy 8: Joke; Sub-strategy 9: Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants; Sub-strategy 10: Offer, promise; Sub-strategy 11: Be optimistic; Sub-strategy 12: Include both S and H in the activity;

Sub-strategy 13: Give (or ask for) reasons; Sub-strategy 14: Assume or assert reciprocity; and Sub-strategy 15: Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, and cooperation). (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 101-129)

In negative politeness strategies, the speakers show their respect of the hearers' territory and avoid the interference of others' action (Jewad, Ghabanchi, & Ghazanfari, 2020). In other words, the 10 negative strategies listed by Brown and Levinson (1987) explain how the addresser and the addressee maintain their social distance from each other.

Sub-strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect; Sub-strategy 2: Question, hedge; Sub-strategy 3: Be pessimistic; Sub-strategy 4: Minimize the imposition, Rx; Sub-strategy 5: Give deference; Sub-strategy 6: Apologize; Sub-strategy 7: Impersonalize S and H: Avios the pronouns "I" and "you"; Sub-strategy 8: State the FTA as a great rule; Sub-strategy 9: Nominalize; and Sub-strategy 10: Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H. (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 129-210)

Brown and Levinson (1987) recognize the significance of three sociocultural factors, the ranking of imposition (R), power (P), and social distance (D), which contribute to the relative weight of different face threatening acts and affect the choices of the politeness strategies.

Methodology and Data Collection

Linguistic Data

This paper focuses on the online language and takes the daily communication in a social online group in the appliance of Wechat as the case. This group was set during the COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control to ensure the citizens' safety and life needs in a centralized quarantine site. The status of the members in this Wechat group encompassed graduates, teachers, hotel staff, doctors, and police. All the linguistics data were extracted from the daily communication among the group members.

Instrumentation

Brown and Levinson' (1987) theory of politeness was adopted as the framework of this research. This study purports to explore how people employ politeness strategies to fulfill their communicative intention and show their politeness while chatting online.

Procedures

The typical linguistic data for this research were first selected carefully. Then, the researcher read the selected data carefully and categorized all the selected data according to the communicative purpose of each dialogue. There were mainly five types of communicative purpose in the linguistic data, naming as exchanging information, expressing gratitude, offering help, requesting, and demanding & warning. Later, the manageable unites were coded and analysed under the framework of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory.

Analysis

Exchanging Information

Dialogue 1

Hotel staff: 我是本次隔离点的负责人！能够为各位同学服务是缘分，也是我本人及全体工作人员的荣幸！

(I'm in charge of the quarantine site! It is my luck to serve all the students, and it is also my honor and the honor of all the staff!)

Student 1: 感谢！辛苦了！

(Thank you for your hard work.)

Student 2: 非常感谢，希望能够度过快乐的隔离时光，请多多关照啦！

(Thank you very much. I hope to have a good time in the quarantine. Please take care of me!)

The hotel staff intends to introduce himself and express all the staff's attitude toward all the students and following work. In this dialogue, the hotel staff exaggerates his interest with the students (Positive Sub-strategy 2), so as to convey that the service for the whole hotel is admirable. Student 1 gives understanding and sympathy to the hotel staff (Positive Sub-strategy 15) to show his gratitude and approval of the hotel staff's work. Student 2 exaggerates sympathy with hotel staff (Positive Sub-strategy 2) through the adverb very much. Besides, he asserts on presuppose the hotel staff's (Positive Sub-strategy 9) knowledge for students' want for having a good time in the quarantine and includes both the hotel staff and students in the activity (Positive Sub-strategy 5). Through the positive strategies, this dialogue succeeds in minimizing the distance between hotel staff and students and beginning a new and good relationship between the two parties.

Expressing Gratitude

Dialogue 2

Student 1: 今天的晚餐好棒！今年第一次吃西瓜，好开心！感谢！你们费心啦！

(What a great dinner tonight! It is the first time in this year to eat watermelon, I'm so happy! Thank you! You must have been bothered!)

Student 2: 是的，饭菜很好吃。

(Yes, the food was delicious.)

Student 1 and Student 2 expressed their appreciation and gratitude toward the delicious dinner and fruit by exaggerating approval and sympathy with the hotel staff (Positive Sub-strategy 2), seeking agreement with each other (Positive Sub-strategy 5), and asserting the common ground (Positive Sub-strategy 7) that it is lucky and happy to eat watermelon in the season and under this circumstance.

Offering Help

Dialogue 3

Student 1: 您好，是否需要建立一个在线表格，这样方便大家直接填写所需物品，群内发消息很容易看漏，也不方便整理。

(Hello, would you like to set up an online chart so that we can fill in the items they need directly? It's easy to miss messages sent in the group and it's difficult to count people's needs.)

Hotel staff: 你们群里发，可以送的我们会在送餐时送，不可以送的我们也无能为力哈。

(You can send the messages about your needs and we will give to you while delivering the meals. If something is unavailable, there is nothing we can do.)

Student 1 attends to the hotel staff's needs (Positive Sub-strategy 1) and raises a common ground (Positive Sub-strategy 7) that it is difficult for the hotel staff to notice everyone's needs when the messages bomb in the group, so that he states the reasons (Positive Sub-strategy 13) and volunteers to offer help (Positive Sub-strategy 10). He also uses in-group identity markers (Positive Sub-strategy 4), such as we to show solidarity with the other members and the hotel staff. The hotel staff also notices the students' need (Positive Sub-strategy 1) and promises (Positive Sub-strategy 10) available help for the students.

Requesting

Dialogue 4

Student 1: 老师，能够提供饮用水么，我们这太渴了。

(Sir, could you please offer some pure water? We're so thirsty here.)

Hotel staff: 房间里有烧水器，千岛湖的水就是农夫山泉哦。

(There is a water heater in the room. The water in Thousand Island Lake is the water of Nongfu Spring.)

In order to request for pure water politely, Students 1 comes up with a question (Negative Sub-strategy 2) and gives an emergent reason (Positive Sub-strategy 13) to minimize the effect of face threatening act. However, the hotel staff declines to offer pure water through the conventionally indirect (Negative Sub-strategy 1) response. Besides giving the reasons (Positive Sub-strategy 13), the staff offers (Positive Sub-strategy 10) a solution for the students to the problem.

Demanding & Warning

Dialogue 5

Policeman: 欢迎各位同学来到美丽的千岛湖，由于近段时间全国疫情防控形势严峻，各位同学一定要提高思想认识，再次强调： 1、房间内不得开空调、排风扇； 2、不允许点外卖、买快递 ；3、任何人不得擅自打开房门或者走出房间，取餐的时候打开一条门缝即可，且要规范佩戴口罩。公安民警和酒店工作人员会24小时开展视频巡查，违反疫情防控相关规定的，公安机关会依法进行处罚！希望各位同学积极配合酒店工作人员的工作，有问题的在群里说，我们会尽量帮大家解决。希望疫情过后大家来千岛湖旅游，好好领略下千岛湖的美丽风光！

(Welcome to the beautiful Thousand Islands Lake. Due to severity of the recent national epidemic prevention and control situation, all students must improve your awareness. Here are the points needed to be emphasized again: 1. No air conditioning and exhaust fans in the room; 2. No ordering takeout and online shopping with express; and 3. No opening the door or going out of the room without authorization. Just open a crack when taking food, and remember to wear a mask. The public security police and hotel staff will conduct video inspections around the clock, and those who violate the relevant provisions of epidemic prevention and control will be punished in accordance with the law! We hope that you can positively cooperate with the hotel staff. If you have any questions, let us know in the group and we will try our best to help you solve them. The author hopes that after the epidemic, you can travel to Thousand Islands Lake and enjoy the beautiful scenery of the lake!)

Student 1: 收到，谢谢！

(Got it. Thank you!)

This dialogue is a warning from the police which clarifies some regulations and demands for the students. The policeman impersonalizes the speakers and the hearers (Negative Sub-strategy 7) as well as states the FTA as a general rule (Negative Sub-strategy 8) to dissociate both parties from particular infringement. In addition, the policeman shows his pessimistic (Negative Sub-strategy 3) in case that the students violate these rules. He also promises (Positive Sub-strategy 10) to offer help if necessary and is optimistic (Positive Sub-strategy 11) about the future life. In response, the student gives sympathy and cooperation to the policeman (Positive Sub-strategy 15) in order to fulfill the policeman's requirement and want.

Conclusion

In this research, the daily languages in online Wechat group are analysed in the framework of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness. The results indicate the prevalence of positive and negative politeness strategies among the interlocutors. Both positive and negative politeness strategies can diminish the effect of face threatening acts and thus facilitate a harmonious social relationship. Positive politeness strategies are frequently employed in achieving the communicative purposes of exchanging information, expressing gratitude, and offering help, while negative politeness strategies can be easily seen in requesting and demanding & warning. It is reasonable because the former three communicative purposes require the cooperation and seeks for approval form others. Nevertheless, the latter two intentions are more likely to trigger the addressee's desire of independence. This study also has the implication that no matter in face-to-face talking or in online communication, politeness strategies play a crucial role in mitigating the effect of offensive language or behavior.

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