A Pragmatic Analysis of Politeness and Impoliteness Theory in TikTok

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Abstract: Natural language is a combination of polite speech and impolite speech, while politeness is to behave in a decent and thoughtful manner towards other individuals, impoliteness shows people's contempt and dissatisfaction. As the Internet advances, impolite speech occurs increasingly. Thus, this research aims at furthering politeness and impoliteness analysis, then let people have a deeper understanding of polite and impolite speeches in an international short video platform — TikTok.

Keywords: politeness theory, impoliteness theory, impoliteness strategies, comments and replies, TikTok, pragmatic function

1. Introduction

We use language for communication and every word we choose to communicate has its specific meaning no matter in the form of writing or speaking. It can be either polite or impolite, depending on certain situations.

In the Internet era, information spreads at an unprecedented speed with content becoming more diverse, which can be seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, we are able to express our opinions and ideas freely without limitation of time and space and by exchanging ideas and thoughts, we are training our minds.

2. Literature review

As is known to us, polite behaviors and impolite behaviors are two opposite behaviors but coexist with each other, and the impoliteness theory is proposed on the basis of the politeness theory. Therefore, the following paragraphs will go through some main politeness and impoliteness studies.

2.1 Politeness studies

Speaking of politeness studies, one of the most representative ones is the Cooperative Principle (CP) proposed by Grice[1] (1975). This theory is based on the assumption that the person with whom you are speaking is actually cooperating in the construction of meaning. To explain his theory in detail, Grice subdivided his general principle into four minor: the Maxim of Quantity, Quality, Manner and Relevance. In his opinion, every successful and smooth conversation needs to abide by these principles.

2.1.1 Lakoff's rules of politeness

Lakoff[2] (1975) notes that Grice's maxims are too broad and a more clear line ought to be drawn in the term of "relevance" and "amount of information". Lakoff proposes that speaker must try to maintain balance between three maxims, which includes formality, hesitancy and equality.

2.1.2 Brown and levinson's politeness theory

Brown and Levinson cast a different light on politeness theory, they relate politeness to face in nature and divide face into positive and negative face (Brown & Levinson[3] 1987: 62). According to them, positive face is primarily about being gracious and showing curiosity about speaker's words and show shared goals and interests. Negative face is to give full respect to other person's space by showing defiance. In the real setting, there also exist some threatening face acts (FTA). Thus, they propose some methods to alleviate and minimize the side effects of FTA.

2.1.3 Leech's politeness principle (PP)

The other influential theory is Leech's Politeness Principle. Leech[4] (1983:80) believes that politeness in communication requires people to adopt two strategies: maximizing "polite beliefs" and minimizing "impolite beliefs". Moreover, Leech's principle has a huge impact on pragmatics. In his principles, he divides the politeness theory into six maxims (Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement and Sympathy Maxim).

However, using the words like "maximize" and "minimize" to quantize politeness is way too absolute and is not objective enough.

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2.2 Impoliteness studies

Contrary to politeness, impoliteness emerges relatively later and attracts less attention from scholars but nowadays, the impolite phenomenon is becoming more common and ubiquitous. It is worth mentioning that Culpeper[5] (1996) was the pioneer in the study of Impoliteness theory and used the term of impoliteness. Although there have been some analysis on impolite phenomenon, it is still not easy to give a clear definition on it.

2.2.1 Culpeper's impoliteness theory

Culpeper defines impoliteness as a set of strategies that is employed to attack the interlocutor's face and to effect social disruption. Also, Culpeper (1996) proposed that there were five strategies that speaker can use to make impolite utterance accordingly: bold on record strategies; positive impoliteness; negative impoliteness; mock impoliteness and withhold impoliteness. About a decade later, Culpeper[6](2005) revised the five major impoliteness strategies by replacing mock politeness with off-record impoliteness and adding a meta-strategy of impoliteness that includes mock sarcasm.

2.2.2 Bousfield's impoliteness theory

Bousefield[7] (2007) meticulously investigated impolite phenomena in the background of communication. In his opinion, interaction plays a vital role in face communication and there is a combination of both positive face and negative face in it, which means that there is no need to distinguish positive face from negative face. In his new model of impoliteness superstrategies, communication of impoliteness is restructured as follows:

(1) On-record impoliteness

This strategy means the attack of the face of a participant or the denying of the expected face wants, needs or rights of the participant is performed in an explicit or unambiguous way.

(2) Off-record impoliteness

This strategy means the use of strategies to indirectly threat or damage an interactant's face in an implicative way and can be canceled. Sarcasm and withhold politeness are two subdivisions included in this superstrategy.

3. An analysis of politeness and impoliteness theory

To make things more clear, here is a brief introduction for the examples. Creator simply means the author of the video and user means the viewer of the video. The number following its creator or user indicates their different identity. If numbers are same, it means that they are the said by same person.

3.1 An analysis of politeness theory

In this section, I will explain the verbal interaction between online users of TikTok by using

the CP and the PP introduced in the literature review of politeness theory. In order to maintain the authenticity of the dialogue, some grammatical or spelling irregularities remain unaltered.

3.1.1 Observation of the CP but violation of the PP

Example 1 (Creator violating the Modesty Maxim)

Creator 1: Best Makeup Product Everrrrr.

User 1: Yes, I love that setting spray!

(A conversation from TikTok: 2021.7.2)

The background of the above dialogue is that creator wore makeup and showed off her makeup effects from different angles in the short clip. This clip also included a link leading to products she recommended and hashtags like #flawlessskin #thebest. Although N1's words are evidently exaggerated and violate the Modesty Maxim, which requires the speaker to minimize compliments on himself/ herself, it conveys another meaning of the conversation: the set of the cosmetics products are worth buying and by using them, you will look more attractive and appealing. N2 agreed with N1's opinion by sharing similar idea on a specific product from the set. This kind of interaction can make N1's words more convincing because there are also other positive comments from customers. As a result, people may be more likely to purchase the products she recommends. But we cannot tell the exact reason driving her to recommend these products, it can be either for commercial profits or personal preference.

3.1.2 Violation of the CP but observation of the PP

Example 2 (Creator violating the Maxim of Quantity)

Creator 2: we're expecting

User 3: It's def a pillow nobody would hit that I am sorry

(A conversation from TikTok: 2021.11.11)

A white woman who was about 70s sat merrily in the 24-year-old black man's lap in this video. The woman seemed

pregnant with a big belly and the man, the woman's husband, was overjoyed and took great care of his wife and caressed her gently. However, in his newly-released video, the woman's belly was flat, indicating that she was not pregnant at all. Besides, normally speaking, it was almost impossible for a woman in her 70s to have a baby. Thus, the creator violated the Maxim of Quantity by telling lies. Having apparently detected his lies, the user remarked that there was definitely a pillow in her hoodie.

3.2 The realization of impoliteness strategies

In this part, I will analyze impolite phenomenon according to two categories proposed by Bousefield (2007). As for on-record impoliteness strategy, just as its literal meaning suggests, it is done in a more direct way, while off-record impoliteness strategy is employed in a less evident way.

3.2.1 On-record impoliteness

Example 3

Creator 4: She's an icon, and she IS the moment.

User 5: Who the hell is she?

(A conversation from TikTok: 2021.12.11)

The glittering posted video shows an American singer named Doja Cat danced rhythmically, swaying her hip to the music, along with backup dancers. The move involve a punch and a body roll that anyone who uses TikTok now basically knows by heart. But for user 5, he/ she seems to be totally unfamiliar with singer and thinks that she is being over-hyped. In this condition, he/ she replies angrily with the slang "who the hell is she?" to express his/ her dissatisfaction towards her being regarded as an icon or even the symbol of US.

3.2.2 Off-record impoliteness

Example 4

Creator 6: Me (24) and my dear mom (45) swap clothes!

User 7: the mum changes ages alot.

(A conversation from TikTok: 2021.7.26)

This is a hot video in TikTok in which a young woman changed some clothes with her mom. Although her mom was 45 years old, they looked just like sisters and both of them had black hair, fair skin and long legs. They started the video by dancing with background music, leaving users a good impression. However, in spite of their positive posturing, user 7 satirizes them in an indirect way by revealing the fact that the mum's identity was fickle. He/ she also hints that they may come from different families and shoot the video together to win people's attention and get traffic.

4. Conclusion

In the pragmatic study of short video platform TikTok, many approaches have been involved. This thesis has a deep insight into polite and impolite remarks appeared in comment section and it is mainly about conversation between the creator and user. The analysis of these comments and replies are based on Grice's Cooperative Principle, Leech's Politeness Principle and Bousfield's Impoliteness Theory.

4.1 Major findings

First of all, based on the two principles, we analyze the interaction between creators and users, both of two parties can violate CP or PP to some degree. For creators, they are more likely to make comments in order to promote their products or win traffic, helping them to get commercial benefit. In terms of users, they may comment according to personal preference, which can be in favor of the creator, stay neutral or be against the creator. User may also divert their attention from the focus of the video and make some irrelevant comments, thus breaking the maxim of relation.

Secondly, we look at impolite phenomena, which are divided into on-record impoliteness action and off-record impoliteness action. Since we are not required to take as much as responsibility compared with real life, individuals may make very rude and indecent comments which they may never dare to say in face-to-face communication. Also, people can use off-record impoliteness to indirectly criticize or satire others, but this kind of act should not be overlooked.

4.2 Suggestions

Due to the limited knowledge and capacities of the author, we only select some typical cases in TikTok, which in turn limit the scope of the obtained data. If more dialogues can be collected, the analysis can be more thorough and conclusions will be made more accurately.

References

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