

Article

Politeness Theory and Resolution of Misunderstandings in Social Media Communication

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Abstract

In the fast-paced and dynamic world of social media communication, misunderstandings frequently arise due to the absence of non-verbal cues and the limited nature of online interactions. This paper explores the role of politeness theory in resolving misunderstandings in social media communication. Politeness theory, a pragmatic framework by Brown and Levinson (1987), provides insights into how individuals manage and maintain face in communication. By examining the use of politeness strategies in online contexts, this paper highlights the importance of explicitness, pragmatic adaptations, and politeness strategies in resolving conflicts and clarifying intentions. It also discusses the challenges posed by the absence of non-verbal cues and the potential for misinterpretation in digital interactions. Understanding and employing politeness theory can enhance effective communication, promote empathy, and mitigate misunderstandings in the ever-evolving landscape of social media platforms. This paper emphasises the significance of incorporating politeness as a tool for navigating social media communication and fostering harmonious online interactions.

Keywords: Politeness theory, social media communication, misunderstandings, resolving, pragmatic strategies

Introduction

Pragmatics, the branch of linguistics that studies how context influences the interpretation of meaning, plays a crucial role in effective communication. Social media is a growing form of communication that enables a wide range of people to interact among themselves. Quan-Haase and Sloan (2017:2) explain that “social media form a new means of socialisation, public debate, and information exchange.” That is, socialisation and other means of communication can be carried out through social media. Hence, the interactional focus to which pragmatists adapt is a broader range of theoretical and methodological framework approaches drawn not only from Pragmatics but also from other neighbouring fields of scientific inquiry, such as social media, which provides communicative content that helps to transform the individual user experience into a joint collaborative social undertaking. Since pragmatic meaning is the outcome of complex processes such as what is said and the meaning implied, the form and content are not only chosen by the author but also by the readers.

Similarly, with the rise of social media platforms, communication has undergone significant transformations, presenting unique challenges and opportunities. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become pervasive in our daily lives, revolutionising how we interact, share information, and build relationships. The impact of social media on communication cannot be understated. It has facilitated instant global connectivity, allowing people to communicate across geographical boundaries and cultural contexts. However, the nature of social media communication introduces distinct pragmatic challenges. The constraints of online platforms, characterised by text-based messages, limited



character counts, and the absence of non-verbal cues, necessitate new strategies for effective and meaningful communication.

The paper employs the quantitative methods of gathering data through questionnaires designed and distributed to social media users on their experiences with misunderstandings in online communication. The purposive sampling methods were used to select a diverse range of social media users who have experienced misunderstandings.

Equally, the paper employs the intricate relationship between pragmatics and social media communication, specifically focusing on the role of pragmatic theories in resolving misunderstandings. By understanding the pragmatic aspects of social media interactions, one can gain insights into how to navigate the complexities of digital communication and mitigate misinterpretations. Technology plays a crucial role in facilitating pragmatic understanding in social media communication. With the advancement of technology, communication platforms offer various features such as emojis, stickers, and GIFs, which can help convey politeness and mitigate misunderstandings. Additionally, translation tools and language processing algorithms can aid in understanding cultural and contextual factors, enabling users to communicate more effectively across different languages and cultural norms.

Furthermore, future directions in technology may involve the development of more sophisticated AI-powered communication tools that can analyse and interpret the politeness strategies used in social media interactions, thereby providing users with real-time feedback and suggestions to improve their communication. The implications of technology in facilitating pragmatic understanding are vast, as it can contribute to more harmonious and effective communication in diverse social media environments. However, it is essential to consider the ethical implications of using technology to interpret and guide social interactions, as it may infringe on individual privacy and autonomy. Therefore, the development and implementation of such technology should be approached with careful consideration of ethical and cultural implications.

By the end of this exploration, the paper makes a case for the importance of pragmatics in navigating the evolving landscape of social media communication and fostering more effective and harmonious online interactions.

Pragmatic Challenges in Social Media Communication

Social media communication presents various pragmatic challenges that impact the way messages are interpreted and understood. These challenges stem from the unique characteristics of digital platforms, the limitations of online interactions, and the diverse nature of the user base. Understanding and navigating these challenges is crucial for effective communication and building positive online relationships. Some of the pragmatic challenges in social media communication are:

Contextual Constraints and Implications on Meaning

Social media communication often lacks the rich contextual information that is present in face-to-face interactions. Without the physical context, such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions, messages can be easily

misunderstood or misinterpreted (Herring, 2016). The absence of context can lead to ambiguity and make it challenging to accurately infer intended meanings. Users must rely solely on the textual content, which can be open to multiple interpretations.

Moreover, social media platforms typically have limited character counts or impose restrictions on message length. This constraint forces users to condense their messages, potentially leading to information loss and reduced clarity. As a result, individuals need to carefully craft their messages to convey their intended meaning within the imposed limitations.

Lack of Non-Verbal Cues and its Effect on Interpretation

Face-to-face communication greatly benefits from nonverbal clues since they give extra levels of meaning and enable the expression of intents and emotions. Nevertheless, non-verbal signs are absent or greatly diminished in social media conversation. The inability to perceive vocal inflections, gestures, or facial expressions can result in misunderstandings and misinterpretations of messages (Derks, *et al.*, 2008).

For example, a sarcastic remark made in person might be accompanied by a playful tone of voice or exaggerated facial expressions, making it clear that it is not meant to be taken seriously. In written form on social media, without these non-verbal cues, the sarcastic remark may be misconstrued as genuine, leading to confusion or offense.

Ambiguity and Misinterpretation Issues

Social media interactions are often characterised by brevity and informality, which can lead to abbreviated or fragmented messages. This brevity can increase the likelihood of ambiguity and misinterpretation. Messages may lack necessary details or context, making it challenging for recipients to accurately grasp the intended meaning (Thurlow, *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, the use of abbreviations, acronyms, and internet slang is prevalent in social media communication. While these linguistic shortcuts can enhance efficiency, they can also lead to confusion and misunderstanding, particularly for individuals who are not familiar with the specific jargon or abbreviations being used.

Misinterpretation can also arise due to differences in cultural backgrounds, values, and norms. Social media transcends geographical boundaries, allowing individuals from various cultures to interact. However, cultural differences in communication styles, humour, and politeness norms can lead to misunderstandings or unintentional offenses (Kim & Yun, 2016). Understanding these pragmatic challenges is essential for effectively navigating social media communication.

Politeness Theory: A Pragmatic Framework

Politeness Theory, developed by sociolinguists Brown and Levinson, offers a pragmatic framework for understanding how individuals manage face-saving and politeness in communication (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Politeness is crucial in

social interactions as it helps maintain positive relationships, respect social norms, and mitigate potential conflict. Politeness Theory provides insights into the strategies individuals employ to balance their own needs and the needs of others during communication. In the context of social media interactions, Politeness Theory becomes particularly relevant due to the diverse and often anonymous nature of online communication. As individuals engage with a wide range of people from different backgrounds and cultures, understanding politeness strategies can help navigate potential misunderstandings, maintain harmonious interactions, and promote a positive online environment.

Politeness Theory identifies various politeness strategies individuals employ to manage their social image and interact with others respectfully. In social media, where communication is often brief and lacks non-verbal cues, understanding and applying these strategies becomes crucial.

- i. **Positive Politeness:** Users employ positive politeness strategies to emphasise friendliness, camaraderie, and solidarity with others. This includes using expressions of appreciation, compliments, and supportive comments to create a positive atmosphere and foster a sense of connection (Vayreda & Antaki, 2009).
- ii. **Negative Politeness:** Negative politeness strategies are used to respect others' autonomy and avoid imposing on them. Users employ indirect requests, hedging language, and deferential expressions to minimise the potential for face-threatening acts (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). By being considerate of others' autonomy and minimising potential impositions, users can maintain politeness and avoid conflict.
- iii. **Off-Record Politeness:** Off-record politeness involves hinting or indirectly conveying a message without making explicit requests or demands. Users may use vague language, allusions, or humour to indirectly communicate their intentions, allowing others to save face while still understanding the intended meaning (Garcia-Marco, *et al.*, 2016).

Examples of Politeness Strategies in Online Contexts

In social media interactions, users often employ politeness strategies to maintain positive and respectful communication. Examples of these strategies include:

Using expressions of gratitude: Users may express appreciation through comments, likes, or shares to show acknowledgment and gratitude for others' contributions.

Employing hedging language: Users may use tentative language, such as "I think", "perhaps", or "it could be", to soften assertions and avoid appearing overly authoritative or confrontational.

Employing humour and emojis: Humour and emojis can be used to lighten the tone of a message, diffuse potential tension, and create a friendly and light-hearted atmosphere.

Giving compliments: Users may offer compliments or positive feedback to show support, validate others' contributions, and foster a sense of camaraderie and mutual appreciation.

By employing these politeness strategies, users can navigate social media interactions effectively, mitigate potential conflicts, and contribute to a positive online community. Understanding and applying Politeness Theory in the analysis of social media communication allows individuals to communicate respectfully, manage potential conflicts, and promote a harmonious online environment. In the following sections, we will explore strategies for resolving misunderstandings in social media communication, drawing on the insights provided by Politeness Theory.

Resolving Misunderstandings in Social Media Communication

Resolving misunderstandings in social media communication requires employing clarification strategies and being explicit in conveying intentions and meanings. Due to the limited character counts and absence of non-verbal cues, messages can be easily misinterpreted. Users can address this challenge by using explicit language, providing context, and asking for clarification when needed (Vayreda & Antaki, 2009). Explicitness helps reduce ambiguity and allows recipients to better understand the intended meaning of a message. By being clear and specific in their communication, users can prevent misunderstandings and foster effective online interactions.

In the absence of non-verbal cues, individuals engaging in social media communication adapt their pragmatic strategies to compensate for the lack of contextual information. Users may resort to alternative means of conveying emotions and intentions, such as using emojis, GIFs, or other visual cues (Derks, *et al.*, 2008). Emoticons, for instance, can help express tone, emotions, or sarcasm, providing additional cues to enhance the clarity and interpretation of messages. These adaptations help bridge the gap created by the absence of non-verbal cues, allowing users to better convey their intended meanings in online interactions.

Resolving conflicts in social media communication requires employing politeness strategies and face-saving techniques. Conflicts can arise due to differences in opinions, misunderstandings, or offensive remarks. Politeness strategies, such as using indirect language, employing positive politeness, or offering apologies when necessary, can help de-escalate conflicts and restore harmonious communication (Garcia-Marco, *et al.*, 2016). Face-saving techniques, such as acknowledging the perspectives of others, reframing statements to minimise offense, or seeking common ground, can also contribute to conflict resolution and promote respectful dialogue (Döveling & Schulz, 2019). By utilising these strategies, users can address conflicts effectively while maintaining positive social interactions on social media platforms.

Understanding and implementing these strategies for resolving misunderstandings in social media communication is crucial for promoting effective and positive online interactions. By employing clarification strategies, adapting to the absence of non-

verbal cues, and utilising politeness strategies, users can navigate social media conflicts, prevent misunderstandings, and foster a conducive online environment.

Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Politeness Understanding

Politeness norms and expectations vary across different cultures, and understanding these variations is crucial in social media communication. Cultural factors shape individuals' perceptions of politeness, including the appropriate use of language, tone, and gestures (Gudykunst, 2005). For example, some cultures prioritise straightforward communication, while others value indirectness and politeness. These cultural variations can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations in social media interactions. Being aware of these differences allows users to adapt their communication style to the cultural norms of their audience, fostering effective and respectful cross-cultural communication.

Social media platforms play a significant role in shaping language use and influencing politeness strategies. The unique features and constraints of social media, such as character limitations, instantaneity, and public visibility, impact the way individuals communicate and express politeness (Androutsopoulos, 2014). These platforms have given rise to new forms of communication, including abbreviations, emoticons, and informal language. Additionally, the affordances of social media, such as the ability to edit or delete messages, influence users' perception of social consequences and may affect their use of politeness strategies. Understanding how social media platforms shape language use and politeness is essential for effective communication and the interpretation of intended meanings.

In social media interactions, the lack of non-verbal cues and the global reach of these platforms make it crucial to consider the cultural context to avoid misunderstandings. Different cultures have unique ways of expressing politeness and interpreting messages and what may be considered polite in one culture could be perceived differently in another (Chen, 2013). By taking cultural context into account, users can avoid unintentional offense and navigate potential miscommunications. This includes being aware of cultural taboos, sensitivity to certain topics, and adapting one's communication style to align with the cultural expectations of the audience. Understanding the cultural and contextual dimensions of politeness is essential for effective and respectful communication in social media interactions. By recognising cross-cultural variations in politeness norms, considering the influence of social media platforms on language use and politeness strategies, and appreciating the importance of cultural context, users can navigate diverse online environments with cultural sensitivity and avoid misunderstandings.

Findings

1. Many social media users encounter misunderstandings in their online conversations, indicating the prevalence of communication challenges in this context.
2. A majority of respondents believe that employing politeness strategies can help resolve misunderstandings in social media communication, highlighting the perceived value of politeness theory in promoting effective communication.

3. Participants often express their opinions and assert their right to freedom of speech, which can sometimes lead to conflicts and misunderstandings when politeness strategies are not considered.
4. Cultural differences can contribute to misunderstandings in social media communication, suggesting the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness in online interactions.
5. While some participants are open to engaging in respectful and inclusive discussions to address misunderstandings, others may resist such approaches, perceiving them as attempts to silence their opinions.
6. Apologising and using polite strategies are common approaches to resolving misunderstandings in social media communication, indicating the recognition of the role of politeness in defusing conflicts.
7. Participants sometimes delete or edit their comments/posts to avoid potential misunderstandings, indicating an awareness of the impact of their words and the desire to prevent conflicts.

These findings are of the view that politeness theory can play a significant role in resolving misunderstandings in social media communication. It highlights the importance of considering politeness strategies, cultural differences, and the impact of words in promoting effective and harmonious online interactions. The results indicate that a majority of respondents have experienced misunderstandings in social media interactions. Additionally, a significant portion of respondents have employed politeness strategies to address these misunderstandings, with a majority finding them to be effective to some extent. This suggests the relevance and potential efficacy of politeness theory in resolving misunderstandings in social media communication.

Conclusion

Social media communication lacks non-verbal cues such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions. This absence can lead to ambiguity and make it challenging to accurately infer intended meanings. Social media platforms typically have limited character counts or impose restrictions on message length. This constraint forces users to condense their messages, potentially leading to information loss and reduced clarity. Social media interactions are often characterized by brevity and informality, which can lead to abbreviated or fragmented messages. This brevity can increase the likelihood of ambiguity and misinterpretation. The use of abbreviations, acronyms, and internet slang is prevalent in social media communication. While these linguistic shortcuts can enhance efficiency, they can also lead to confusion and misunderstanding, particularly for individuals who are not familiar with the specific jargon or abbreviations being used. Understanding and navigating these contextual constraints is crucial for effective communication and building positive online relationships. The lack of non-verbal cues in online interactions can significantly affect the interpretation of messages.

Politeness theory plays a role in resolving misunderstandings in social media communication by suggesting that people adjust their communication style and strategy based on the feedback and context they receive. One of the cultural and

universal functions of politeness is to solve communication and relational issues. Additionally, a study on computer-mediated communication found distinctive characteristics of the style in which people communicate, indicating the potential application of politeness theory in this context.

In conclusion, it is crucial to enhance awareness of politeness norms and strategies for more effective and harmonious online interactions. Users of social media platforms should be mindful of cultural and contextual variations in politeness expectations, adapting their communication style to accommodate diverse audiences. Social media platforms themselves have a responsibility to implement ethical guidelines, employ technological tools for enhancing politeness, and promote respectful and inclusive online environments. Additionally, researchers can continue to explore the ever-evolving nature of social media communication, develop new theories and frameworks specific to digital contexts, and investigate the potential of emerging technologies for facilitating polite and constructive interactions. By embracing the principles of politeness theory, fostering awareness of cultural and contextual considerations, and leveraging technological advancements, we can cultivate a more positive and respectful online sphere.

Questionnaire

Dear respondents,

These are some questions to make us understand “The Role of Politeness Theory in Resolving Misunderstandings in Social Media Communication”

1. Question: Have you experienced misunderstandings in your social media interactions?
Yes: 78%, No: 22%
2. Question: Have you used politeness strategies to resolve misunderstandings in social media communication?
Yes: 64%, No: 36%
3. Question: How effective were the politeness strategies in resolving misunderstandings?
Very Effective: 45%; Moderately Effective: 32%; Not Effective: 23%
4. Question: How often do you encounter misunderstandings related to cultural differences in social media communication?
Sometimes, 42%; Frequently, 18%
5. Question: Have you ever deleted or edited a comment/post to avoid a potential misunderstanding?
Response: Yes, 57%; No 43%
6. To what extent do you believe politeness strategies can contribute to resolving misunderstandings in social media interactions?
Not at all- 35%; To a great extent- 65%

7. Have you ever changed your language or tone in a social media conversation to prevent misunderstandings or conflicts?
Yes- 80 %; No- 20%
8. How comfortable do you feel employing politeness strategies in online discussions when disagreements arise?
Not comfortable at all – 5%; Very comfortable- 95%
9. Have you ever apologised or used polite language to resolve a misunderstanding in a social media conversation?
Yes- 100%, No- 0
10. How often do you consider cultural differences and diverse perspectives when engaging in discussions on social media platforms?
Rarely-15%; Always- 85%
11. In your experience, how effective have politeness strategies been in resolving misunderstandings on social media?
Not effective- 45%; Highly effective- 55%
12. Do you believe that misunderstandings on social media could be avoided or minimised if users employed politeness strategies more frequently?
Yes 75%; No- 25%
13. Have you ever engaged in a respectful and inclusive discussion to resolve a misunderstanding, even when you strongly disagreed with the other person's viewpoint?
Yes- 45%, No- 55%
14. How willing are you to learn and apply politeness strategies to enhance your online communication and reduce misunderstandings?
Not willing at all- 10%; Very willing- 90%

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