

POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN RESTAURANT REVIEWS ON TRIPADVISOR

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ABSTRACT: *This study analyzed the politeness strategies in TripAdvisor restaurant reviews as well as how the notion of face is applied. This qualitative study draws upon Brown and Levinson's face theory to analyze the politeness strategies frequently employed by TripAdvisor restaurant reviewers which include bald-on-record, positive politeness strategy, negative politeness strategy, and off-record strategy. The findings show that there were 767 politeness utterances across all reviews. The positive politeness strategy (P+) with 63.75%, was frequently used while the use of negative politeness (P-) with 1.96% with was least. In addition, the reviewers use different strategies to protect the positive face in positive politeness. As the research in the field is still at its nascent stage, results of this study may provide a valuable reference for computer-mediated communication and politeness theory.*

Keywords: Politeness strategy, Computer-mediated Communication, 'face', TripAdvisor reviews

1. INTRODUCTION

It is beyond doubt that communication is an important element in human interaction. With an individual's communication competence, that is, his ability to choose a communication behavior that is both appropriate and effective for a given situation, he is able to observe the transactional and interactional functions of language. The latter refers to language that functions as a means of social relation maintenance while the former refers to language as a means of conveyance of information [1]. In the global era, traveling has grown rapidly and made easy whether for business, family affairs, or personal interests. And, no matter where adventures take people, restaurants, and food are a central part of the trip. Interestingly, through Web 2.0, they can have a sneak peek and access to their target destinations with no difficulty. Online travel reviews, for instance, have become a popular forum for tourists to share their travel experiences and of which are an increasingly important source of information for other tourists in various forms especially for those who critically expect a very satisfactory experience [2; 3; 4]. This third-party perspective is often perceived as more trustworthy than the marketing campaigns initiated by industry [5]. Moreover, it is written from a tourist's perspective and thus provides an indirect and vivid travel experience for the audience [6]. Remarkably, online travel reviewers' pragma-linguistic competence (e.g. the capacity to make linguistic choices that are consistent with the context), and social-cultural competence (showing how social and cultural factors are reflected in communicative practices) are manifested in their reviews. One important aspect of these competencies is politeness. Several researchers in the 1970s and 1980s argued that "politeness" was a particular driving force in how people determine language choice and negotiate relational meaning. We can count the approaches by among the early and influential contributions to the study of politeness [2, 7, 8]. Working within a framework of pragmatics in the broad sense—the study of language in use—these researchers argued that there are not only syntactic rules in establishing grammaticality of sentences but also pragmatic rules that determine the

appropriateness of language use. They thereby all endeavored to complement the cooperative principle (CP) [9]. In brief, the CP postulates that interactants, in their process of interpretation, work on the assumption that people adhere to four maxims: the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner [9]. Others [10], suggested that there are main theoretical models of politeness: (i) the 'social norm' model, the 'conversational maxim' model (e.g., [8]), (iii) the 'face-saving' model [7] and (iv) the 'conversational contract' model (e.g., [11]). Of these four models, the most influential and comprehensive is Brown and Levinson's now-classic 'face-saving' model. Additionally, it was proposed that politeness is the expression of the speaker's intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face-threatening acts towards the listener, thus, a universal concept [7]. Some defined politeness 'a battery of social skills whose goal is to ensure everyone feels affirmed in a social interaction' [12]. Therefore, being polite can be an attempt for the speaker to save their own face or the face of who he or she is talking to. The purpose of this paper is to explore how TripAdvisor restaurant reviewers mitigate this threat to their face by making use of the linguistic features of politeness strategies. Thus, I analyzed TripAdvisor restaurant reviews in the top five (5) restaurants in Sagada Mountain Province.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEMS

Specifically, the present study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What politeness strategy do TripAdvisor reviewers employ in their restaurant reviews?
2. How is the notion of face utilized in the reviews by TripAdvisor reviewers?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The researcher will utilize the qualitative method in the presentation of data. Qualitative method is a research method that seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations.

2.2 CORPUS

The corpus consisted of 200 restaurant reviews from TripAdvisor.com. The researcher purposefully focused on 40 reviews from each of five (5) restaurants in Sagada, Mt. Province, Philippines. The average review was approximately 100 words in length, with the shortest around 25 words in length and the longest approximately 409 words. The collected texts are all in their original language which is English, however, a few reviewers used Tagalog and so translations were made, if necessary. TripAdvisor.com, which was founded in early 2000 and is headquartered in the U.S., with more than 60 million members and over 170 million reviews and opinions of hotels, restaurants, attractions and other travel-related businesses is one most popular web sites for travel [13]. In August 2014, a survey found that TripAdvisor.com was the most widely recognized, used, and trusted travel website. This website, which aims at providing “unbiased” user-generated recommendations for travel destinations and accommodations, represents an ideal – and, to date, unexplored – medium for investigating unelicited CMC reviews. Others [14], pointed out CMC data offer the following advantages for discourse analysts: they are “unmediated by the transcription process” and they also lack “the problems bound up with the observer’s paradox,” so they represent a source of “authentic” data. Furthermore, since more than 80% of travelers today are currently consulting sites such as TripAdvisor [15], these sites represent an important CMC platform and one which is changing the way that consumers make travel decisions [16, 17, 18, 19]. Consequently, it is believed that the impact and influence of such internet-based texts is potentially powerful and far-reaching.

2.3 PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

The participants for this study consisted of travel reviewers in TripAdvisor Inc. They were either travel enthusiasts or tourists of different ages. The participants used English in writing their reviews.

2.4 RESEARCH PROCEDURE AND DATA ANALYSIS

The corpus was downloaded from TripAdvisor.com. In light of Brown and Levinson’s taxonomy of politeness strategies, the data collected were carefully analyzed and interpreted. Specifically, the researcher identified the politeness strategies used in restaurant reviews from TripAdvisor.com and coded them under four general categories of politeness strategies: bald on record (ON), positive politeness(P+), negative politeness(P-), and Off the record (OFF). The strategies can sometimes overlap since it is possible to encode more than one strategy in a single statement.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing 200 online restaurant reviews, the researcher found that the travel reviewers used a total of 767 politeness strategies. Out of these, 201 were bald on-record (BOR), 489 were positive politeness (P+), 15 were negative politeness (P-) and 62 were off-record (OR).The percentage of the use of different politeness strategies that TripAdvisor reviewers employ in their restaurant reviews is presented in table 1. People use language differently to communicate with each other. It can be gleaned from the table that the most

frequently used politeness strategy is the positive followed by bald on-record, with 63.75% and 26.21% respectively. On the contrary, these results do not confirm Brown and Levinson’s assumptions, based as they are on the concept of social distance and power. According to this concept, our exchange, which is characterized by relationships with high social distance and power between participants, should have been characterized by lower percentages of positive politeness and higher percentages of negative politeness strategies. However, in [15]; and [12] authors explained that in computer-mediated communication the two basic rules of communicative competence (make yourself clear and be polite) often clash, since being polite often entails ambiguous or indirect communication. Some [9], also postulated that anonymous discussion provides a more free environment to express something.

Table 1. Politeness Strategy of TripAdvisor Reviewers in Restaurant Reviews

POLITENESS STRATEGIES	PERCENTAGE
1 Bald on-record (ON)	26.21%
2 Positive (P+)	63.75%
3 Negative (P-)	1.96%
4 Off-record (OFF)	8.08%
Total	100%

The findings obtained from the reviews would seem to indicate that TripAdvisor reviewers are satisfied to subordinate the principle of politeness to that of clarity. Thus, the presence of higher percentages of positive politeness strategies found in the reviews can be explained as reviewers wanted to write messages that were more direct and, therefore, clearer.

These findings were in agreement with the study conducted by [20] on the use of politeness strategies in Wiki-mediated communication in which participants used positive strategies to establish friendship and solidarity. The obtained findings were also in line with the results of the study conducted by [21] indicating that the participants frequently used positive strategies to express their shared problems and experiences in an online self-management program.

Result of the analysis of the reviews posted also revealed that they demonstrated a variety of positive politeness strategies, attending to hearers’ (both the restaurant owners and the potential customers) positive face. The use of varied positive politeness strategy adopted by reviewers was illustrated with the following example

Example 1
 “Superb!”

This cafe deserves an excellent grade (P+1) for very (P+3) hospitable service (P+1) they gave when I visited them this morning. I supposedly order pesto but unfortunately, they running out of basil that politely explained. Instead, I ordered Tomato Basil Pasta, graaaaaaabe(P+3) ang sarap (P+1) !! (P+2) so (P+3) delicious (P+1), very (P+3) fresh

and hot (P+1)! Plus, when Im about to order for a box of 6 chocolate muffins (good for vegan) they approach me that the muffins should be consumed immediately because this has no preservatives and baked yesterday. I told them that Im from Bulacan, with no hesitation, immediately bake fresh muffins for me to take home. Thank you for the stuff (P+15) who are taking good care of their customers. I pray that this cafe will grow and will never run out of customers. Thank You for the experience (P+15)..

As [7] posits, positive politeness strategies seek to minimize the threat to the hearer's positive face. These strategies are used to make the hearer feel good about themselves, their interests or possessions. Positive face desire is closely linked with the claim of common grounds as in conveying that hearer is admirable, and interesting and that the speaker and hearer are cooperators which indicate that the speaker knows the hearer's wants and is taking them into account and so claim reflexivity at the same time. In the excerpt above, the reviewer's claim of common ground is evident in her expression "This cafe deserves an excellent grade" attending to the restaurant owner's interests and wants of receiving a good feedback coming from their customers and at the same attending to potential clients who are concerned of visiting an exceptional place which will gratify their needs and wants. Similarly, the reviewer also used exaggeration in her line "graaaaaaaabe ang sarap!!" ("It is extremely delicious!!") where the use of 'grabe' and the repetition of letters as in 'aaaaaa' in the Tagalog language is an utterance of exaggeration and an intensifier at the same time. The use of exclamation points is likewise used to indicate forceful utterance or strong feeling. In the same manner, the reviewer also used adverbs such as "so" and "very" that are typically used to emphasize the high degree or intensity of their approval and compliment on the restaurant's food, service and interpersonal. Additionally, the statements of gratitude such as "Thank you for the stuff" and "Thank You for the experience" are expressions of satisfaction in visiting the place. The "I pray" offer that was followed by "this cafe will grow and will never run out of customers" optimistic statement are likewise a convincing factor of the speaker's desire to make the hearers feel good.

Results show that 26.21% of the reviews are bald on-record. Bald on-record strategies do not attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer's face although there are ways that bald on-record politeness can be adopted in trying to minimize face-threatening acts implicitly. It is used when someone expresses something directly, clearly and unambiguously, so using such a strategy will often shock or embarrass the hearer.

Example 2

"Best food in Sagada "

All-natural and vegan food! Please do not go and ask for meat... it thrives in its homegrown food and organic twists of Filipino dishes!

We love ginger tea with honey. The Miki Mi Ni and the Vegetable Adobe! The Hummus sandwich is also worth a try! Sit in the left-most corner for the extravagant view of the rice terraces! Very quiet and quaint place!

In example 2, it can be noticed that although the reviewer seems not to maintain the hearer's face of the statement "All natural and vegan food!" and "Please do not go and ask for meat" as restaurant seekers would usually choose to have a variety of choices to choose from, the interest of the hearer was yet addressed with the reviewer conforming to [9] maxims and thus, providing sufficient, relevant, perspicuous and truthful information about the restaurant's food. Although they seem to be a threat to the face, the statements above together with "Sit in the left-most corner" are in the interest of the hearers since the information that followed explains the reason why the strategy was used.

Table 1 also shows that 8.08% of the politeness strategies is indirect off-record. [7] indirect off-record is, in general, more polite than on-record ones. This strategy uses indirect language and removes the speaker from the potential to be imposing.

Example 3

"Not the friendliest staff"

Is it so hard to smile? (OFF 10) My bf and I traveled 6 hours on a bus from Baguio to reach Sagada so excited and exhausted to experience greatness so we headed for coffee. The staff here need to perk it up a bit and at least look amused rather than these sullen depressed faces. My God! We had the yogurt with banana with cappuccinos but what ruined it was ALL of those who work at this establishment.

In example 3, the reviewer started a rhetoric question "Is it so hard to smile?" in an attempt to indirectly express her desire for the staff to all least observe some etiquettes in dealing with customers especially that the reviewer in the review reveals that they came from a long travel and wanting to at least experience greatness. Although this strategy relies heavily on pragmatics to convey the intended meaning, it also utilizes the semantic meaning as a way to avoid losing face. However, in the following sentences, the reviewer tends to be straight forward on suggesting the staff to do something about dealing with customers. With this, it can be supposed that politeness observed in CMC can be different from face to face/verbal interaction. [22] suggested that this is the case because the identity of the participants in online interactions are most often kept anonymous and therefore this creates opportunities for participants to be impolite.

Focusing on negative politeness strategies which are oriented towards the hearer's negative face and emphasized on avoidance of imposition, the TripAdvisor reviewers only used 1.96%. The results may have been caused by the features and limitations of the corpus where the nature of reviews is to give evaluations on the restaurant experiences and to give pieces of advice, warnings, and suggestions to the hearers (both the restaurant owners and the potential customers).

Example 4

"So-so. You can eat elsewhere for much better and cheaper" We had our first meal here and it was just so-so. Yoghurt shakes weren't blended. Just threw in a couple of cubes of ice in there. Had the java chicken and it was just okay. For the price, you can (P-2) find other spots with food that taste much better and tastier. The consistent thing is they serve very generous portions.

In the example above, the reviewer used different strategies of politeness. Specifically, on negative strategies, the reviewer used the modal “can” on the suggestion to the hearer of visiting another place on the premise of satisfaction on the taste of food and towards spending money. In this case, the reviewer avoided imposing to the hearer. I can also be observed that in example 4, the reviewer used other politeness strategies in her posts. For instance, the use of “so-so” in the statement “We had our first meal here and it was just so-so” and “just okay” in the statement “Had the java chicken and it was just okay” are the reviewer’s way of avoiding disagreement.

4. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing upon Brown and Levinson’s face theory, the present study explored the use of politeness strategies in TripAdvisor restaurant reviews as well as how the notion of face is applied in reviews.

The results of the study revealed that the use of politeness strategies leads to strategic construction of co-operative social interaction [23]. The TripAdvisor restaurant reviewers used all the types of politeness strategies correctly to create positive social interaction and to communicate their experiences in the restaurants to the hearers, that is the restaurant owners and potential restaurant customers successfully. Specifically, the TripAdvisor reviews displayed the use of Positive (P+) 63.75%, Negative (1.96%), Bald on-record (OFF) 26.21%, and Off-record (ON) 8.08%. The findings show that positive politeness strategy (P+) was frequently used while off-record (OFF) was least. The reviewers demonstrated a variety of positive politeness strategies, attending to hearers’ (both the restaurant owners and the potential restaurant customers) positive face, making them feel good about themselves, their interests or possessions. There were some face-threatening acts that the speaker may employ in the reviews that might damage the positive face of the hearers like its assessment of the restaurant in general or in terms of food, services, price, staff, and location, her expressions of indifference towards the hearers in general and the perception and willingness to disregard the emotional well-being of the hearer. With reference to social variables, results do not confirm Brown and Levinson’s assumptions, based as they are on the concept of social distance and power. According to this concept, our exchange, which is characterized by relationships with high social distance and power between participants, should have been characterized by lower percentages of positive politeness and higher percentages of negative politeness strategies. With reference to the negative politeness strategies, it has been viewed that the TripAdvisor reviewers, as customers are always right, have the power to not avoid or intend to avoid the obstruction of the freedom of action. However, since TripAdvisor features only the speakers’ assessments and responses from the hearers are not procured, P- are less employed. Thus, the negative face is almost not threatened. The findings of the present study may result in a greater and deeper understanding of the role of politeness strategies used in online reviews. This study may also stimulate researchers to investigate many other contextual

factors affecting the choice of strategies including the rank of imposition or social distance. This study also may contribute to a better understanding of the affordance of politeness and interpersonal relationship formation and maintenance in the context of the Filipino language and culture. However, this study is just descriptive research of the typical politeness strategies used in restaurant reviews on TripAdvisor. More empirical studies on the deployment of these strategies would be conducive to the further exploration of politeness in CMC communication. The number of reviews in this study was relatively small and profiling of the reviewers were not considered. This necessarily limits the conclusions that can be made from the study. Thus, the generalization of the results requires more approval from other contexts. Also, the use of politeness strategies in other CMC genres or in other learning contexts will deserve careful investigation.

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