

A Study of “Face” Culture in Online Social Verbal Conflict

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Abstract: Verbal conflicts are common in online social networks, yet the underlying pragmatic mechanisms driving these disputes have received limited attention. As Internet technology continues to evolve, the Internet has become an essential communication platform in daily life. In online interactions, people's speech behaviors often differ from those in face-to-face settings, influenced by various online context factors. Conflictual discourse is intrinsically linked to incivility and the concept of "face" in communication. Verbal conflict typically arises when the speaker and listener confront or dispute one another over language use due to differing opinions. It is a dynamic process that evolves with the communication context, often involving arguments, debates, and opposing discourses, which can significantly affect the interaction. At the same time, individuals tend to follow the principle of politeness and face culture, striving to maintain their public image during communication. This study examines a verbal conflict within a university QQ group as a case study, analyzing how such conflicts may violate the principles of politeness and face culture. Ultimately, this research aims to provide insights into everyday verbal communication, with the goal of reducing conflicts and improving communication in online settings.

Keywords: Politeness Principle; "Face" Culture; Verbal Conflict; Online Socialization

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1.Introduction

In today's society, the Internet has brought people closer to each other, and when people communicate, they also pay great attention to their image in public. When the public image is damaged, various kinds of verbal conflicts often occur, such as trolling and quarrelling in public cyberspace. Everyone wants to be respected by others, but “unintentional behaviour” can be a sword that hurts one's face. In addition, understanding and making good use of various pragmatic principles can promote harmonious communication and help people to better complete various social activities, so the study of verbal conflict discourse in online social networking has certain practical significance.

2.Theoretical Framework

2.1.Face Culture

The first to propose the concept of “face” in the West was the American sociologist Goffman (1955), who argued that “face” is “an individual's self-image” and “an individual's claim to positive social value in front of others in a given social interaction” (Goffman, 1967). Many subsequent Western scholars have been influenced by Goffman. For example, Brown and Levinson, who are representative of the field of “face” research, put forward the classic paradigm of “politeness-face”, which is based on Goffman's theory of “face”. Brown and Levinson define “face” as “the personal image that each member of society wishes to claim for himself in public” and “the image or activity of the self”. “an image or activity of the self that is not disturbed, restricted, or impeded by others” (Brown & Levinson, 1987). From Goffman's and Brown & Levinson's definitions, it can be seen that Western “face” focuses more on “individuality”, i.e., how I am respected and recognised by others, and how I am not interfered with by others, and its starting point is the “individual”. Its starting point is the “individual”. Chinese scholars, on the other hand, believe that Chinese face is non-unitary. From this, we can see that Chinese “face” values the recognition and respect given by others, the public and the society, and has a strong dependence on the society, which is just a sharp contrast to the Western “earning” of others. It can be said that the starting point of Chinese “face” is “society”.

Face is divided into positive face and negative face, the former refers to the desire to be appreciated and I

oved by others, which is a demonstration of one's social attributes, while the latter refers to the unwillingness to be imposed by others, which expresses an individual's aspiration and pursuit of freedom and autonomy. When their face is threatened, people will take some face remedies to save their face. The preservation of face often takes into account social status, and when the speaker's status is low, people tend to sacrifice their own face voluntarily to preserve the face of others. As a result, the threat and preservation of face is a tug-of-war between saving one's own face or causing harm to the face of others. Therefore, understanding the role of face in verbal conflict helps people maintain good interpersonal relationships and achieve communicative purposes.

2.2.Principle of Politeness

Talking about face culture it is necessary to mention the principle of politeness. The principle of politeness was put forward by Leech, a famous British scholar, in his book *Principles of Pragmatics* in 1983. Leech also believed that the principle of politeness and the principle of co-operation are the two basic principles of communication. He also divided the principles of politeness into six categories.

The Maxim of Tact: To make others suffer as little as possible, and to gain as much as possible.

The Maxim of Generosity: To minimise one's own gain; to maximise one's own loss.

The Maxim of The Maxim of Approbation: Minimize the disparagement of others; maximize the praise of others.

The Maxim of Modesty: Minimize the praise of oneself; maximize the disparagement of oneself.

The Maxim of Agreement: Minimize the disagreement between the two sides of the dialogue; maximize the agreement between the two sides of the dialogue.

The Maxim of Agreement: Minimize the disagreement between the two sides of the dialogue; maximize the agreement between the two sides of the dialogue; maximize the agreement between the two sides of the dialogue; maximize the agreement between the two sides of the dialogue.

The Maxim of Sympathy: to minimize the antipathy of both sides of the dialogue; to maximize the sympathy of both sides of the dialogue.

It can be seen that following the principle of politeness is a prerequisite for harmonious conversation, and when the principle of politeness is violated, face-threatening remarks will occur. In previous studies, scholars have examined the politeness principle from different perspectives. It can be seen that previous studies have focused on a particular scenario to explore the use of politeness principle, but there are few studies on people's speech in online social networking, and at the same time, previous studies have rarely addressed the phenomenon and causes of politeness violation. Therefore, the present study takes the argumentative speech in online social networking as the research object.

2.3.Verbal Conflict

Conflictual discourse is inseparable from incivility and face-saving. Verbal conflict is usually a state of confrontation or dispute between the speaker and the listener over the use of language due to differences of opinion.

Verbal conflict is a dynamic process that changes with the state of communication, usually accompanied by arguments, debates and other opposing discourses, and has an impact on communication.

3.Data Collection and Data Analysis

The study selected a chat transcript from a group of postgraduate students at a university as a corpus with the aim of exploring how verbal conflict in online socialising violates the principle of politeness and threatens face.

The cause of this quarrel is that classmate B helped classmate A to complete the processing of photos, but classmate A did not pay labour remuneration to B in time, and the two of them had a heated verbal conflict in the group, and finally the conflict was resolved under the persuasion of classmates. With the help of the cor

pus of verbal conflicts between the two, the study analyses the causes of verbal conflicts in online social networking tools based on the principle of politeness and the theory of face to help people reduce conflicts and resolve conflicts in online social networking.

3.1. The Follow and Violation of the Politeness Principle.

In verbal communication, people need to follow the principles of co-operation and politeness, and when the principles of co-operation and politeness are violated, verbal conflicts arise. Sorting through the corpus, we found that both students violated the politeness principle when they engaged in communication. Firstly, both of them violated the principle of praise.

Example 1:

B: "This guy's a liar who doesn't pay for his work."

A: "There are really people like you in this world, huh? You're exactly the kind of person who only sees things in a narrow way. Is it even worth it to pay someone like you?"

In this example, a verbal conflict begins when B calls A a liar in a QQ group, tarnishing A's reputation. A then retaliates with a personal attack on B's character and behavior. Both violate the principle of praise by failing to minimize disparagement and instead using sarcasm, criticism, and insults to undermine each other. This only escalates the conflict. They also violate the principle of consistency, as they fail to handle the situation calmly in the beginning and instead fuel the disagreement, making it worse.

Example 2:

B: "How was I supposed to know you were offline? I was chatting with you, and then you disappeared, so I couldn't find you. Let's talk privately—I'll apologize, alright?"

A: "You're apologizing in private after talking about me in the group? Is this how you do things? I went offline, but can't you wait just three hours before throwing criticism my way? Why criticize so fast? I've already explained the situation in the group, and the payment is on its way. Apologies don't really matter right now."

B: "Go ahead, keep going! Internet's fine now, huh? You're quick to criticize but slow to pay?"

B's comments make the conflict even worse. A then asks B, "Can't you wait just one business day?" B replies, "I can't wait that long." B's response intensifies the situation, and both of them end up violating the principle of consistency by not managing the conflict properly. Had they followed this principle and approached the issue more calmly, the conflict wouldn't have escalated so quickly. They also violate the principle of humility, as neither of them shows any understanding of the other person's situation.

Example 3:

A: "You're really the only one who judges someone with a small mind, thinking you're the gentleman while others are just petty."

Here, A compares themselves to a "gentleman" and puts B down as a "villain." This type of speech creates discomfort and tension. If A had shown more humility and explained to B, in a calm tone, why the payment hadn't been made yet, instead of questioning B's character, the situation might have been resolved more quickly. Both violated the principle of humility.

Example 4:

C: "Look, don't jump to conclusions before you know the full story. And if you're having trouble making the payment, just explain. Both of you need to calm down."

Bystander C follows the principle of sympathy, using words to ease the tension between A and B and create a more understanding atmosphere. C's approach is more empathetic, helping A and B realize their mistakes. The situation is eventually de-escalated, and the verbal conflict ends. In this exchange, both A and B violated the principle of politeness, leading to a deeper conflict. However, bystander C, adhering to the principles of sympathy and consistency, helps resolve the issue and brings the conflict to an end. The situation highlights how important it is to follow communication principles in order to prevent misunderstandings and escalation.

3.2.Threats to face and remedies.

The face of the listener and the speaker needs to be taken into account in verbal conversations. People expect others to respect their face, and when personal face is threatened, people will also take measures for face preservation. At the same time, in daily communication, people also need to focus on maintaining the face and image of others. Brown and Levinson believe that the nature of speech acts is all about threatening face behaviours, and that in the process of conversation, both parties tend to engage in heated verbal conflicts in order to save their own face. Negative face means not wanting others to impose their will and wanting their behaviour to be free from interference and hindrance from others, while positive face means wanting to be appreciated and approved by others. When the speaker employs a series of words such as commands, demands, threats, warnings, etc., the negative face of the listener is threatened. And when the speaker criticises, blames, insults, denigrates and complains about the hearer, it threatens the hearer's positive face. At the same time, when the hearer's face is threatened, he or she takes various measures to save his or her face. Therefore, when people engage in verbal communication, they should express themselves politely, preserve their face and respect others. When one's face is threatened, people's words are mostly unfavourable to the solution of the problem. In this conflict, both parties' face was threatened to a certain extent, and they also used certain face remedies to defend their face. These words are analysed one by one below.

3.3.Analysis of speech acts that threaten positive face.

The speaker may use some words to threaten the listener's positive face, and this kind of words mainly includes criticising, blaming, complaining, insulting the listener and so on. Example 1 occurs at the beginning of a verbal conflict. After B unsuccessfully seeks payment from A, he sends the words in a QQ group of postgraduate students in a university, which has nearly two thousand students, spreads faster and causes a greater impact. The words of B accusing A of being a liar in public threaten the positive face of A. The speaker may use some words to threaten the positive face of A. The speaker may use some words to threaten the positive face of the listener. At the same time, the listener can in turn threaten the speaker's positive face. For example, when the speaker makes a remark, the hearer responds to the speaker by making a rebuttal, criticising, or accusing the speaker with words that in turn threaten the speaker's positive face.

3.4.Analysis of Speech Acts that Threaten Negative Face

When the speaker exerts pressure on the listener by issuing commands, requests, suggestions, warnings, etc. to the listener, he or she threatens the listener's negative face. In this conversation, the point of conflict is B's demand for payment from A and A's failure to respond in a timely manner. A's individual behaviour enjoys full freedom and does not want to be interfered by others. Therefore, B's verbal behaviour of demanding an immediate response from A is essentially a threat to A's negative face. At the same time, the listener can in turn threaten the speaker's negative face. For example, when the hearer responds to the speaker's speech, or uses words such as warnings, commands, or threats, he or she threatens the speaker's negative face.

When a party's face is threatened, the party will take steps to remedy the face. At the beginning of the conversation, B accuses A of being a liar, and in order to maintain his public image and save his face, A refutes B and further says that B is "treating the gentleman's heart like a man's heart" and explains the reason why he did not pay the money on time. B further attacks A when he is criticised and comments on A, such as "criticising a man is so painful." B further attacks A when he is criticised and makes comments about A such as "criticising someone who is so quick to criticise and so slow to pay", further intensifying the conflict. Obviously, both of them were saving their own face while damaging the face of others, so the conflict between them was further intensified. In the end, Classmate E stood as a peacemaker, defended the face of both parties, helped both of them to resolve the embarrassing situation, and remedied the face of both of them, easing the tense atmosphere between them.

4.Results and Discussion

The Implications of Politeness Principle and Face Theory for Conversation Based on the principle of politeness and the theory of face, combined with the corpus of actual conversations, the study puts forward some implications for people's conversations, which can help people to reduce contradictions and dissolve disagreements in verbal exchanges.

People should follow the principle of humility by minimizing self-praise, acknowledging their shortcomings, and engaging in self-criticism. This helps resolve conflicts and fosters peace. For example, B should admit his hasty judgment and apologize to A, while A should also apologize and understand B's urgency. Additionally, the principle of consistency should be followed to reduce differences and promote agreement, which helps resolve conflicts. A and B should avoid escalating misunderstandings, with A apologizing for the late payment and B avoiding quick judgments. Lastly, when one's face is threatened, they should protect it without harming the other person's face. In this case, if A hadn't retaliated against B, the conflict would not have escalated. Both A and B's actions caused further damage to each other's face. Verbal conflicts are common, and resolving them depends on one's ability to adapt.

5.Conclusion

Online social speech covers a wide range of areas and spreads quickly, and speech conflicts occur from time to time. At the same time, verbal conflicts usually contain the violation of the principle of politeness and the theory of face. Taking a certain verbal conflict in the graduate student group as a corpus, the study explores the violation of politeness principle by verbal conflict with examples, and further analyses verbal conflict in detail under the perspective of face theory. Finally, based on the politeness principle and the face theory, the study offers some insights into people's daily conversations, which help people to better accomplish various social activities.

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